

QUAD



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Cover image: Lindsey Wolfcale, *Creation*, mixed media

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Editors' Picks

Claire likes: Carleson Dozier, "Lines for the Day You
Come Home"

Kevin likes: Madison Underwood, "Charles F. Loveless
Memorial Collection"

Paul likes: Jeremy Burgess, "This Doesn't Leave the
Room"

Allison likes: Lindsey Wolfcale, "Creation"

Chuck Smith,
Biomorphic Study, 2006
22" x 7"
charcoal



For Laurie Anderson, in Sympathy

Carleson Dozier

I too have stared at the page wishing
the lines could compose themselves
like Escher's impossible hands,
dreading the inexorable sentence,
the heavy rap of the gavel,
the familiar cord about the neck.

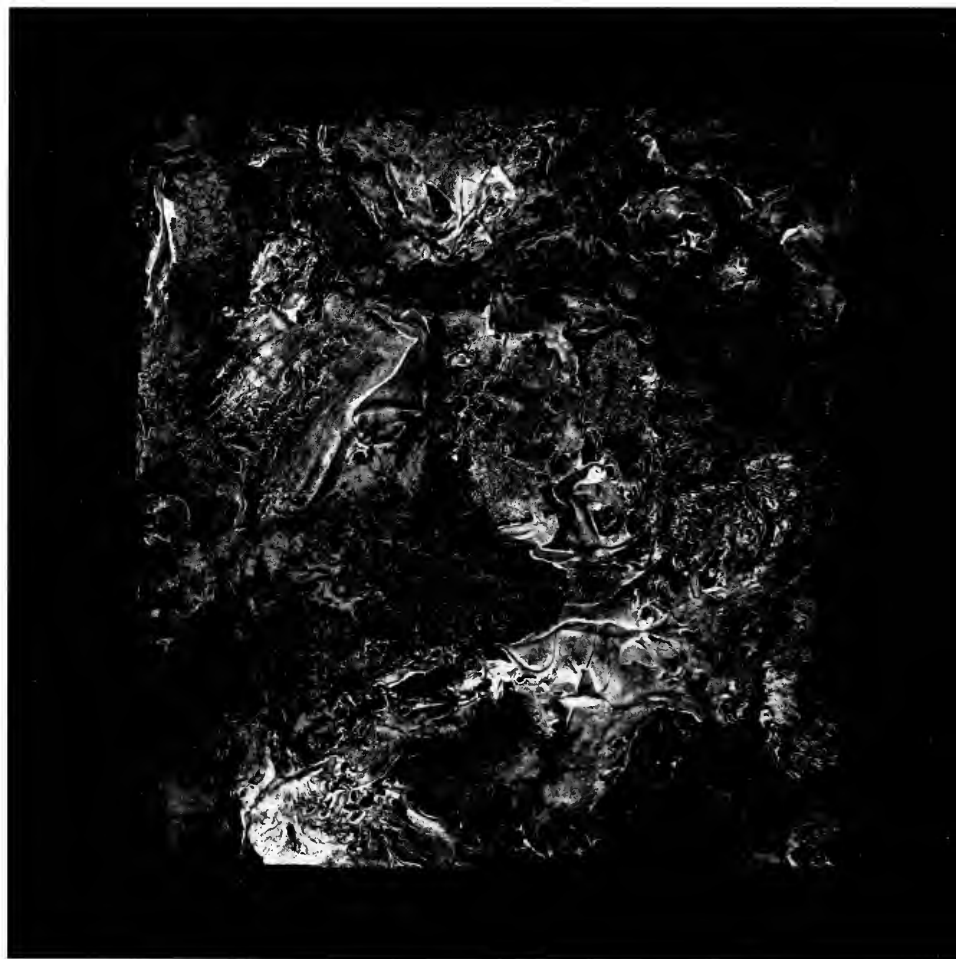
I have balked at the staring blankness,
fingers fumbling to translate
what vibrates wordless in the blood,
to pin down the soaring otherness of it
between shaky full stops and anemic semicolons;
have hesitated, knowing that in the picking,
even the shallowest root is irreparably severed,
that the tower's spades and hearts cannot be
written balanced, word by groping, clumsy word.

Sometimes the poetry comes,
without warning like lightning—
the primordial singularity
suddenly splitting itself open
and flinging galaxies, spinning like tops,
into the yawning black—
and it's all I can do to keep up,
dotting Is and crossing Ts.

But other times it doesn't;
other times the words refuse
to be born, sink back down
into the balmy darkness of the womb
and dig in their heels.
I can hardly blame them, really.
This world is such a cold one—
hardly deserving of poetry.

[fiction]

...And into the Bosoms o



Kacey Swindell, *Weagle!*, monoprint, 6" x 6"

Their Sons After Them

Charles Peters

It had to be the right place: the long grass was plagued with weeds, the house the color of the bottom of a shoe.

As the taxi shrieked out of the driveway, I stood in the shaggy, dew-damp grass of my grandfather's front yard. The greasy driver had offered to wait for me, but I told him that I wasn't sure how long I'd be but thanks anyway, that I'd planned on calling another one later. Apparently, he didn't expect to pick anyone up in the farmland suburbs thirty-five miles east of the Chattanooga Airport and expressed his anger to me through skid marks, leaving behind the smell of exhaust and french fries as he blew through stop signs. After he left, the entire street grew silent. The sun was setting behind me, and the birds and the kids who had flocked to it were all retreating back into their homes. It was as if the evening was taking a breath before the long howl of night. I cleared my throat for some noise, and a TV flashed on in the house next door with the sounds of canned laughter responding. I reached back into my bag for the worn scrap of yellowed paper with the address my mom had scribbled. Behind me, a streetlamp clicked on, buzzing.

In the flickering glow of the streetlamp, his house looked like a face—two lightless windows, the dead eyes, flanking the yawning mouth door. I looked down at the slip of paper with the address. Because I'd unfolded it, read

it, and refolded it so many times on the flight up, it was close to ripping in half. 9010 Walthall Drive, Bakersfield, TN. The address had faded since my mom gave it to me, but I knew that it matched the one on the mailbox. I only checked as a way of signaling my arrival. I took a step forward. It had to be the right place: the long grass was plagued with weeds, the house the color of the bottom of a shoe. It must have been years since anyone had painted it. And after a closer look, I saw that the blinds inside the windows were crooked and missing slats, giving the eyes of the house a sloppy, drunken look. The dark door-mouth wasn't actually agape but instead looked as if it had never been opened, like the mouth of a mime. I folded up the scrap of paper, shoved it back into my bag and pulled out my cell phone to check the time. It was only seven fifteen, but the lights in the house were already out. I turned to look over at the houses next door. The one to the left was punctuated by a real estate sign and looked lifeless, but the one on the other side was the one lit up by the throbbing blue light of a TV. Maybe my grandfather's already gone to bed, I thought, trying to imagine the routine of a seventy-something-year-old widower. As the days started accumulating you'd probably look for ways to make them as short and simple as possible to minimize the size of the pile. Whatever the case, I was not about to leave. It wouldn't have been worth the trip if I didn't at least try. I took another look around before walking up to the front door.

Behind me, the sun was finally dragging the last of its lazy rays below the hilly horizon in a fit of red rage. The houses on this side of the street flushed with the light, and the ones across cowered in a blue-gray. With the light from the buzzing streetlamp and the falling sun casting shadows of me on the door, I made a fist and went to knock.

September 1977

Dad,

I've told you the reasons why I left, so this letter isn't an explanation of anything or an apology. And I don't regret leaving. Make sure you get that. And I know you didn't want any more contact with me, and I'm fine with that. I just wanted to write to tell you I'm alive and staying with a friend's family down in Alabama. I don't want to tell you any specifics because you'll call the cops. And I'm not coming back. I knew that when I crossed the state line.

-Jerry

My dad, Jeremiah "Jerry" Bartlett, Jr., left home when he was nineteen and never went back. But when asked more about it, he'd reply with the same evasive "that was a long time ago" response, as if time dilutes history's mistakes until they become innocuous versions of the more potent past. Eventually I learned through my mom's pleading not to pry into that part of my dad's past. I learned not to ask why we saw my mom's parents during the big meal holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas but never my dad's dad. I knew that his mom, my grandmother, was dead. And I even learned not to look at the faded picture on my dad's dresser. In it, a young and smiling black-and-white version of my dad was struggling to hold up a stringer of fish. Behind him stood an out-of-focus man with his arms crossed around a fishing pole and the top of his head cut off by the edge of the frame.

My dad had effectively erased all traces of his dad and solidified the break by settling down in central Alabama, a hundred and fifty miles south of where he grew up and left. "Why should I worry about it, Sarah?" I'd hear him shout at my mom, "I've got today and all tomorrows to worry about. Isn't that enough?" Then he'd slam a door, not allowing my mom to respond, and silence would seep in through the air vents and up through the carpet.

August 1980

*Dad,
It's been almost three years since I left.
I'm getting married next week, and I'd like to say that I wish you'd be there. But I'm not so sure of that. And I'm not so sure you'd even come. Sarah said she'd love to meet you, that she wishes she knew you. She thinks I ignore her when she mentions you, but it's just that I don't know how to talk about you with her. Until next year,*

-Jerry

P.S. I've attached the address of the chapel where we're getting married.

My grandmother on my dad's side was dead before I was born. Other than that, the facts surrounding her story were off limits as well. In our house, there are a few small, silver frames with photos of her, but none of them in which she is shown with her husband or her son. They are carefree portraits of a young woman smiling in oblivion. What I did know about her, though, managed to form an image just as flat as her pictures. She was one of six children born into a Catholic family from some Midwestern state. She liked cooking, gardening, etc. Every Mothers' Day, my mom would lay out a handful of flowers in front of one of the portraits of her mother-in-law. She said that the nice lady deserved someone to mourn for her, that it must be terribly lonely to wander the afterlife with no one calling out to her. But my dad never removed the flowers, which I guess was his way of remembering her.

About a month ago, while I was home from school for summer vacation, I asked my mom if she had Grandfather Bartlett's address. I got a small thrill from saying his name, as if I were getting away with a crime. My mom let fall the book she had been reading, her eyes swelling as she looked up at me silently. I reassured her Dad wasn't home yet. She peeked around a corner in the living room.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"I guess I'm just curious about him," I said. "He is family, after all." I assumed the words contained some power to reunite long-lost relatives regardless of geography and time. "Plus, it's like I don't like him just because Dad doesn't. He might actually be cool, you know? It just doesn't seem fair to the guy."

My mom looked at me for a second, a victorious smile growing across her face. "No," she said. "It doesn't seem fair at all."

Looking over her shoulder, she led me to her nightstand and opened the drawer. From underneath a bible, a few motivational books, and a half-knitted scarf, she pulled out a worn leather address book. She flipped past the Bs and the rest of the alphabet to a tiny slot stitched into the inside back cover. With a finger, she slid out a yellowed and folded scrap of paper. She handed it to me, saying, "I copied this from an envelope I found on your dad's desk a while back." I opened the scrap and read an address for

somewhere in Tennessee. "I've written him a few times before, but he only replied once. It was to the letter I wrote after I had you. All he said was, 'Thanks but no thanks. I don't know what this means, you writing to me. But congratulations.' I wrote to him again but he never replied. I wish I'd have kept his letter, but I was afraid your dad might find it." She shut the address books and picked at the cracking leather.

"So do you think it's even worth it for me to try?" I asked. "I mean, if the guy doesn't want contact there's no reason to keep bothering him, is there?" My mom was about to respond when we heard the front door open. I slipped the scrap into my pocket while mom stuffed the books back into the drawer and left the room with an affected, cheery greeting and questions about my dad's day. He mumbled something unintelligible and, loosening his tie, went to the den to watch TV, where he sat in silence on his frayed recliner-throne for the rest of the evening.

That night I wrote a letter.

I stood staring at my shadow as it was framed by the front door of my grandfather's house. The sun had retired, giving the streetlamp sole dominion over that part of the street. My fist was still raised, making my silhouette look like that of a killer, only one who had forgotten the murder weapon. I heard a car coming down the street and turned to look over my shoulder. The driver stared at me as she passed, her neck twisting unnaturally while her car slowed at the stop sign. I looked right at her, my neck twisting as well. After a pause she pulled forward and her car disappeared behind some houses.

The crickets squeaked in the weeds near my feet. Behind me, the streetlamp hummed, and I could hear the muffled laugh-track from the TV next door. I let my fist fall three solid times on the hollow door. The crickets stopped for a second only to redouble their efforts.

June 1985

Dad,

It's been four years since I left.

You have a grandchild now. Sarah gave birth to a healthy boy yesterday afternoon. He's got mine and your green eyes and a shock of your dark hair. And I can kind of see a little bit of Mom in him, at least from the pictures of her I stole on my way out. It'd be great if you could meet him. But now, I'm not even sure these letters reach you, or if they ever did. Until next year,

-Jerry

P.S. We named him Jeremiah

**My fist was still raised, making my silhouette
look like that of a killer, only one who had
forgotten the murder weapon.**

After I sent the letter to my grandfather, I'd rush to check the mail before my dad could get to it. Saturdays were tough because he'd most likely be outside working in the front yard. I would have helped him but he never wanted the company; he said he preferred the quiet of the outdoors. If he was plucking weeds from around the mailbox, I'd pray the mail didn't come just yet, not with my grandfather's letter at least. I couldn't help but imagining a terrible scene erupting between my dad and me in our front yard. After a week, I even came to regret writing the letter.

Nonetheless, the letter came on a Thursday and read:

June 2006

Jeremy:

It's nice to hear from you. Your mom wrote to me when you were born and a few times before that. I can't believe it's been twenty-something years. Time flies. As they say.

Don't bother coming out here. It's too far and a waste of your money. So thanks but not thanks.

Jeremiah Bartlett, Sr.

However unenthusiastic and uninformative the letter had been, the short declarative sentences intrigued me, as if my grandfather were piling up bland and non-suggestive lines to cover up what he really meant to say. At least, that's assuming he had something else to say. And his handwriting was interesting; it was curly and youthful, contrasting with the flat tone. Regardless, the letter didn't deter me. I took the mere fact that he even responded as an open invitation to visit him. However, I never replied to him in the month leading up to the trip. I guess I was afraid that by telling him I was coming, I'd get a vehement response telling me to stay where I was and never try to reach him again. Similar things had apparently happened with him.

But I did, despite it all, have his address. All I had to do was type it into some internet mapping website and I'd have a visual. It would become a real place, and I would point to it, saying, "Take me here."

I planned the trip with my mom, who supported me immediately and never questioned my intentions. Maybe, I thought, this was a trip she'd planned on making herself one day but could never work up the nerve to buy a ticket. We told my dad that I was going to visit a friend from school who lives up in Tennessee. Because my dad was so distanced from my life, he could be made to believe almost anything given convincing names placed on a convincing timeline. I packed enough essentials to fill a carry-on bag and spent the few days leading up to the flight in a nervous fit. But all I had to do, I'd tell myself, was get on the plane and everything would be set into motion. Things would inevitably fall into place, and I'd get some answers.

May 1988

Dad,

It's been over ten years.

Jeremy is about to turn three—we call him that because "Jeremiah" is too much of a mouthful for him now that he's really started talking. And I'm thinking a lot about what it means to be a good father. I think the first few years were such a great blur that

I didn't have time to stop and think. But now, it's all rushing onto me. I mean, what kind of things should I do with him, what of places should I take him to, now that he's old enough to somewhat understand? And how much should I protect him from? Will he not be too sheltered? What if I'm not home enough?

Sarah seems to know what she's doing...so I'd feel awful confessing that I'm completely lost. I don't know, Dad. I'm kind of scared. But you won't answer. I know this. That's why these letters have become my way of getting stuff off my chest. It's like I'm shouting things at you through the locked door of your study, rattling that big brass knob that's always locked, not knowing if you're even in there.

Until next year;

-Jerry

On the flight up to Chattanooga, I sat holding a stack of papers in my clammy hands. On top were the boarding passes and a flight itinerary. Underneath were the printed-out directions to my grandfather's house and the yellow scrap of paper from my mom's address book clipped to it. I shuffled through them until the ground below was swallowed by the clouds.

"Are you going home or leaving it?" It was the woman sitting next to me who smelled like a bottle of spilled perfume. She was probably in her mid-fifties.

"Leaving, I guess." I looked down at the papers.

"First time flying or something? You've had the jitters for a while."

"No. I've flown before."

"Well you sure fooled me. Anyway, I'm Diane and I'm going home, *I guess*. Got two boys up north of Chattanooga. My husband and I live down in Birmingham, moved down for work and all." I nodded my head in response and turned to look out the window. Some of the clouds had broken, exposing miniature suburbs and highways. "Of course, when I say 'boys' I mean men," she continued. "They're both in college, a senior and a freshman. Which leads us back to 'work and all' if you know what I mean." She laughed at herself, and I turned, plastering on a smile and reaching into my bag for my headphones as a way to cut short the conversation. I didn't turn any music on but just closed my eyes and listened to the silence.

June 2006

Grandfather Bartlett,

This is Jeremy, your grandson. I got your address from my mom. She said she's written you a few times before. I figured I'd give it a try now.

I'd really like to meet you, to talk to you. It feels weird knowing that this is the first thing I've ever said to you. I don't know what happened between you and my dad, or even if something did happen. But it really doesn't involve me. So if it's convenient for you, I'd like to fly up there to visit. I'm on summer vacation and have plenty of time. Just let me know when would be good for you.

-Jeremy

When the stewardess announced that we were making our initial descent and the orange light dinged back on, I stuck the papers and my headphones back into my

It would become a real place, and I would point to it, saying, **“Take me here.”**

bag. Diane turned to me. “Have good nap?” she asked. Her carry-on bag was perched in her lap.

“Yea, I did.” The buildings outside had grown a little.

“Well it was nice talking to you. Or rather, at you.” She smiled at me with a wink. “But the world needs its quiet people too, just so long as they can speak up when it matters, right?”

“Right,” I said. And taking my cue, “By the way, I’m Jeremiah, well, Jeremy actually.” For some reason I told her my given name, though I never used it and only heard it during first-day-of-class roll calls at school. What I didn’t tell her was why I came to Chattanooga.

“A pleasure to meet you, Jeremy, and good luck with everything, whatever you’re doing here,” she said, nodding her head at the window next to me, indicating either the world or just the city.

“Thanks,” I said. “You too.”

It was then I realized that my plans only got me as far as my grandfather’s front door. Maybe I’d be better off just jumping on another plane and going back home, leaving this issue dormant. What’s another thirty years, anyway?

But the plane landed in Chattanooga and I was propelled from the terminal. Outside, I flagged an unfortunate looking cab and slid in, holding out the directions for the man. The evening sun was behind us as we got on the interstate, and it lit up the cabby’s swollen face as it was reflected off the rear-view mirror, from which swung a hole-punched photograph of a young girl in a softball uniform. The driver was eating from a Happy Meal bag he had shoved in between his legs and wiped his greasy hands on the ratty ceiling of the car between handfuls of fries. The trip was marked by these grease-smeared tallies over head and the red digital numbers on the meter counting the miles as they translated into cash. After we got off the interstate, the world outside the cab became increasingly rural the more we drove. There were more farms and fewer streetlamps, and the driver sped up.

When it felt as if we should have been getting close, I asked the driver about the little girl in the picture. His eyes glanced up at me through the rear-view mirror as he pulled out the fry he was chewing on. “That’s Callie, my daughter,” he said with more than a little excitement. “She plays first base and pitches sometimes. Got a good arm, that girl. And sweet as can be.” He finished the fry with a grin. “If you’re in town tomorrow night, she’s got a game over in Stuart. Championship game, too.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Well, I’m leaving tomorrow afternoon. But thanks anyway.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. And that was the end of it. Not long after, he’d pull into my grandfather’s driveway only to leave in a fit a moment later.

September 1990

Dad,
Thirteen years.

Jeremy's five now and has just started kindergarten. His teacher says he's one of the smartest kids in her class and is really curious about things. I'm so proud of him. He makes being a dad a little easier on me.

How was I with you? I bet I was a pain, not to mention when I showed up at your study drunk and fired up to leave that place. That night's clearer now, I think, than it was then. But that was a long time ago. I actually told Jeremy something similar today when he asked about you. He said they talked about grandparents in class today, and he didn't know what to say about you or Mom. I just told him that I ran away because I was a bad boy and that you and I didn't speak—that it was a long, long time ago.

Anyway. I haven't heard about your death so I'm guessing you're still alive. You could respond and try to fix things. That's if you wanted to.

-Jerry

I tried knocking again with the side of my fist, but there was still no answer or any sign of movement in the house. I rang the doorbell then knocked for a third time. To stop would be to confirm that no one was here and I'd be stranded in Bakersfield, Tennessee. I took a step back and looked up at the two drunken window eyes. The face stared back at me. I ran up to the door and pounded with both fists, hoping to knock the door down.

"Whoa there, son!" I heard over my pounding. "You're a few days late with that knocking. That is, unless you're with the estate crew. But you don't look to me like no wrinkly old woman, so I say you weren't, huh?" The man was taller than me and had a wide grin carved out of his dark, unshaven face. He wore a flannel shirt untucked on one side and walked towards me with muddy boots. "Well? What you say?"

I rustled up an answer. "No. Wait, what estate crew? I must be at the wrong—sorry." I moved to turn around but he grabbed my shoulder and spun me around toward the light. He just looked at me.

"You favor Jeremiah a bit," he said after a few seconds. "You've got the same curious green eyes...Grandson, right?"

Shocked to hear his name, I told him I was Jeremiah's grandson. "Do you know when he'll be back?" I asked.

"Back? Well probably never, unless you believe in ghosts. But I gather you haven't heard?"

"No," I said. After all this and he's dead.

"Well your grandpa's dead, son. I think they're saying a heart attack did him in. The mail lady guessed it when he stopped checking the mail. Sorry for the loss." He threw out a bony hand which I grabbed on instinct. His grip was rough and loose but had probably once been much stronger. "The name's Dale Turner. He was a friend of mine, at least as much of a friend he could be, being all quiet like he was." Dale's eyes glazed over for a second. Then he added, "But a great man all the same."



Krystal Tibbs, *Grief*, india ink on paper, 18' x 13.25'

"I wouldn't know," I replied, realizing that Dale's inadequate obituary was the only account of my grandfather's life I'd ever heard. "Anything else about him?" I asked, pressing my luck. Dale looked at me with eyes squinted. "I never really knew him," I added.

"Well, he never would tell me that something was gnawing at him, but I could just tell. He had that way about him, just how he'd go along half-assed, like his mind was elsewhere. But I really don't know, son. Sorry about it all." He turned with a tip of an imaginary hat and began to walk off.

"Wait," I shouted. He turned around on his heels. "I don't have anywhere to go. Do you know of anyone I could talk to? I'd just like to—"

"Say no more," Dale replied, holding up a hand. "Now that you mention it, your grandpa gave me a spare about a month ago. Said it was in case he loses his. Just hold tight." He strode back to his house, mumbling something that sounded like "...was a bullfrog." I slipped off my bag and leaned up against the dirty siding of my grandfather's house.

Dad,

I think today marks twenty years.

I'm not sure if I've got anything left to say to you, so this will probably be my last letter.

I guess I'm still sorry, but I don't know.

It's your turn now.

-Jerry

After a few minutes Dale returned with the key. While fumbling to stick it in the lock, he said, "Take whatever you want, son, because the estate ladies will likely pawn the valuables and trash the rest. Such disrespect if you as me. Much better that family gets first dibs." I nodded in thanks and picked up my bag. I heard the key slide into the lock. "So how come you don't know your own kin?" he asked, finally unlocking the door. "Family troubles?"

"Yeah," I said. "Family troubles."

"Well I hope you find what you're seeking." He tossed the key over to me, but I missed and it fell in the grass. "You can keep it, son. My gift to you," he said with a grin. "Just lock up when you're done. Or don't." He turned back to his house and walked off.

"Thanks," I said, but he didn't hear me. And I realized I never told him my name.

I knelt down in the grass to pick up the key and looked up at the door. Dale had left it ajar, but all it revealed was the darkness inside. I realized then that my grandfather had died in this house, and I considered calling my mom to tell her that the plan had failed. I'd get a cab, maybe the same one, and ride back to the airport to try for an earlier flight. I'd get points for trying.

But the door was cracked. I stood up and pocketed the key. As I pushed the door open, its rusted hinges let out a stubborn groan. I reached in to turn on some lights before shutting out the light from the streetlamp.

In the silence of the house, I could hear my heartbeat in my ears. And though I had to persuade myself, I took a quick tour of the place, not opening any doors, just flipping on lights to make it less haunting. It was as if the death in the house had made the dark thicker and more intransigent. It was a modest house and the air was heavy with the smell of musty, smoke-soaked mothballs. I tried to imagine my dad as a kid living here, going through his daily routine. But it was almost impossible because there were no pictures of the family. And the history of this place could only be inferred by the layers of dust.

When I calmed down, I started peeking into the few rooms of the house. Most looked long unused and were sparsely furnished. Only one of the doors was locked. At the end of the hall I found a small bedroom with a twin bed, a desk, and a chair. I imagined this being my dad's old room and went through the drawers and the closet. But they were empty. For some reason, I remembered the picture that sat on my dad's dresser, the one with his dad's head cropped off. I left the room, shutting the door and continuing back down the hall. When I passed by the locked door, I remembered I had a

key—Dale's gift to me. I turned and looked at the big, brass knob. It was worth a try, I decided, and pulled the key from my pocket.

It fit that lock too. The door swung open onto another darkened room. I found a light switch and flipped it on. The bulbs overhead were hesitant and flickered but soon gave in. It was a study, and from the look and smell of it, it must have been where my grandfather spent all his time. It was the only room that looked lived in: the Oriental rug was ragged and there was an oppressive smell of cigar smoke and alcohol. The walls were lined with stuffed bookshelves, and a small TV sat in one corner. When I walked up behind the desk perched in the center of the room I noticed the leather chair was cracked and worn with use. It placed its sitter facing the door. Aside from an ashtray the only item on the desk was an envelope with the familiar curly "Jeremiah" scribbled in black ink.

I opened it and found a note and two small, brass keys. The note said:

July 2006

Jeremiah:

Not sure which one will read this first. But either one of you might want to know this: in the bottom left drawer are the things I read of what he said. In the bottom right are the things I never said and he never read. Until now.

Dad, or Grandfather

I put the note down with a chill, realizing that this was likely the last thing he ever communicated to anyone. I imagined it was kind of like seeing a ghost, as if he was in the room, pressed between the books and woven into the threads of the tattered rug. I dumped the keys into my hand. They were old and tarnished.

Just as the note foretold, there was an old shoebox filled with envelopes in each drawer. I pulled out the box on the left and placed it on the desk. The letters were all addressed to this house and were written in what looked like my dad's choppy script. They were opened and arranged chronologically, the oldest ones more yellowed than the rest. In the other box were letters addressed to our house in Alabama and were written in the curly script of my grandfather. These were sealed but had no stamps on them. I placed the two boxes next to each other on the desk, where they sat daring me.

One of the light bulbs flickered, but I ignored it. I reached in the first box and pulled out a letter from my dad. It was dated September, 1977. The edges and the folds were worn, much like my yellow scrap with the address. In this first letter, my dad just told my grandfather that he was safe. It must not have been long after he had left home. The next few were basically the same but were more apologetic. One of them talked about my parents' wedding. Several others recounted the night my dad left. From the fifth letter on, the one dated June, 1985, my birthday month, I started reading them aloud, mostly because the house was too quiet.

When I read through my dad's box, I slid the other one closer to me.

The earliest of them read:

August 1977

Jeremiah,

These words come with difficulty, but I feel like I need to try to set things right. I don't want these words to die with me. You, at least, deserve as much. You've been gone for two months now with no contact. You weren't lying. You probably won't write or call, and I guess I deserve it. I've never told you this, but when I was your age—almost exactly—I also left home for good. My dad was dead and my mom planned on moving in with another man. He talked too much, and I didn't like him. So I got out of there. I should have known better than to let you go. But I was angry then. I know it hasn't been fair. Not for either of us. For that, I'm sorry. After you left, I stared at the locked door for hours, waiting to hear you knocking again. I thought about how it would be different. I constructed the scene countless times, thinking of how I would tell you how hard it is to look at you without thinking of your mother; how you have her smile and her nose. (Your eyes, though, are mine without a doubt.) How I cannot help but think of her every day and resent you for her death even though I know it wasn't your fault. How could it have been? The doctors said it was complicated, that your mom told them to make sure you came out healthy, whatever that took. She would have wanted me to be the best father for you, and my deepest regret is not being that. I've betrayed you both. There's more, but I'm sorry.

Your father;

J. B., Sr.

What was interesting about my grandfather's letters was that the rest of them were not much more than rephrased and reemphasized versions of this one. Occasionally, I'd find little additions, responses to what my dad had said in his letters. One had,

"Congratulations. I'd like to meet Sarah, too." Another said, "Jeremiah is a great name for you son." And, "Being a father's not easy. But then again, I'm not the one to ask."

After I had read through both boxes, I started over again. I could see through the window behind the desk that Dale's TV was off. On that second time through, I went back and forth with the letters, reading them all aloud and staging some sort of dialogue between my dad and my grandfather that had never happened. If I concentrated hard enough, I could almost imagine them talking to each other. But they kept saying the same things over again.

Right now it's two fifteen in the morning, and the desk is covered with decades' worth of letters. Over the past several hours I have read and reread each of them, trying to give voice to all those silent years. When I'm finished with them, I'm going to pack them up and take them home to my dad. He needs to read them. And maybe we could even talk about them.

I found a stack of stationary and an old wooden pen in the desk and have started writing my part of this story, adding it to the conversation. When it's finished I will sign it Jeremiah Bartlett, III, and read it aloud so that the words can echo off the walls of this damned old place.



Carrie Tompkins, Untitled, oil, 45" x 34"

Henry Palmer

Bartender's Resolution

A highball glass
is not cup enough
for all the people
the world will drink.



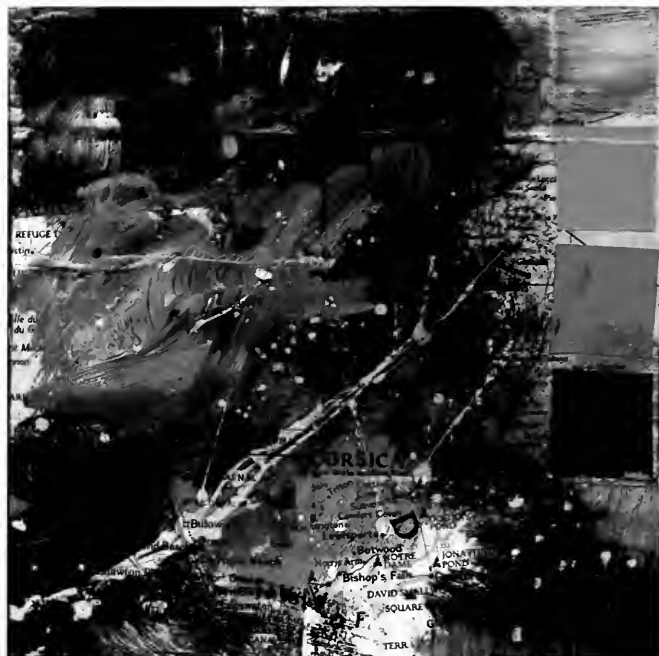
Elizabeth Wilson, *Start*, silver gelatin, 8x10

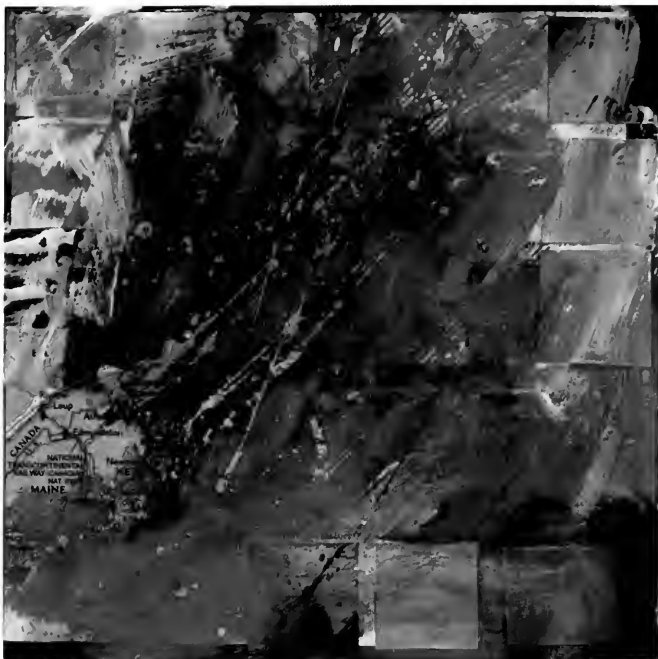
Cedric Rudolph

For the Incident in the Crandall Canyon Mines, Utah

I see you fumbling, tumbling
over yourselves in effort to rescue your own. They come
in every size—fat, short, skinny—six men
trapped beneath the earth, but as you try tunneling,
your machines go numb; the engines flood,
the pipes leak, the gauges stall
because nothing will let you break
the crust. Perhaps the earth
holds some secret it will not let you know,
a word spoken sharply against or for
these men: whether renegade or shadow,
father or failure, whatever they were,
they now are lost, tumbled
to the bottom of Earth.

Groping, your fingers feel, feel
for another hand not your own, the scuffed-up
hand of a 40-year old who played baseball
in high school and now coaches his son
around the yard—workers' hands,
scuffed-up, beat-up hands, strong
yet precise enough to crack an egg just right,
hands that could direct pulleys
and cup around a mouth to call you
from a high landing. You miss seeing those hands
each day, from afar or near and you miss
knowing where they were, miss seeing them
above the soil, placed on a back
or resting on the gear shift of a bulldozer.
You go to your machines
and you pull the levers and push the buttons.
They break for you.
Your hands are not their hands.





Birny Robert,
Flooding Series,
6" x 6" each,
mixed media



Meghan Pruitt

How to be an American

O say can you see?

Uncle Sam wants you! To say no to drugs—

Hugs before godfersakin kids these days and their
Goodfernuthin rap music why don't they just get a
Motherlovin' job? A job to pay the bills, student loans
Bank loans, just enough to buy that home with the
White picket fence—it's the American dream!

O say can you see?

Golden arches over the interstate, are you lovin' it?
Are you? Are you lovin' this blessed country,
One nation, under oil, with limited liberties
And unjustified justice for all? The scales
Of democracy fall, weighed down with yellow
Journalism and dirty gold.

Charlie Brown can pitch a fastball better than
Georgie Junior can fight a war and Janice
Dickinson knew more about the manipulation
Of this virgin nation than good ole George knew
At his coronation but who will succeed the throne?
Washington is rolling in his grave.

The home of the brave isn't so great these days,
Those cowards in France might give you a chance—
But only if you say, *Je suis Canadienne*. At least
Canada keeps out of everyone else's sandbox.

You gotta understand this freedom land really is
That bad, but just don't think about it or else
Sink down into the detrimental existential
Un-American idea of questioning authority—
Breaking from the minority—saying fuck this
Conformity I'm tossing the flag in the garage,
No number of stars can instill in me the true
Feeling of liberty.

I'm only nineteen but I can sing the blues
About the church of football, beer and trailer parks—
There must be an art to going nowhere in life,
But they sure are damn proud to be American!
Proud to be allowed that monthly check—
This program brought to you by my government
Taxes, sponsored by your local college kid
With no car and a part time job.

How do you be an American?
Simply ignore the inevitable,
Leave an extra place or two at the table
Don't forget to pay an arm for the cable
But don't you dare download that
300 billion dollar grossing box office smash!

How do you be an American?
You say "yes I can park in handicapped spaces,
Sorry I can't stop gaining weight and
I can't make it all the way to the entrance
Of one of five local Wal*Marts.

You say "I pledge allegiance to the flag
That's on every t-shirt and every car, W
Is for winner of highest gas prices and
Highest crime rates, the gays can't marry
But goddamnit, I want a gun."

O say can you see?
Corrupt democracy isn't all it's cracked up to be
I'm 18 to 25 but I'll only vote if you promise
To leave me the hell alone.

I pledge allegiance.
I pledge allegiance.
I pledge allegiance.



Jasmine Higbee, *I'm Down with High Art*,
spray paint on paper, 42" x 85.5"

Anne Condit

On the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

Here in this hostel
a barn-house turned hippie brothel, we sell ourselves
for the wages of self-comfort and justification; for
we did not forge the ethics we accept; they were inherited,
tired and rusted at the hinges connected to our foundation.

The rain beats at our windows, smearing
the real world and running down in sheets,
warping our view of the land where

We built our houses of straw and steel,
modelled after indigenous ideals
that we could never fully understand

From our windows forged of
organic bamboo and free-range economics.
We comfort ourselves with the idea that
justified consumption is not consumption at all.
Or if it is, then at least

It's better than its Wal-Mart born stepchild,
birthed by Chinese to be fed to Americans, starving
for ideals that have not been handed down in "mint condition,"
captive in dented and tattered plastic boxes.
We stare at the untapped potential locked inside.

Salt

Karen moved the briny
plastic tub from the blue door of their
apartment, where John would shed
his wet waders and gloves
before dinner, so the first time she smells salt
each morning is in the winds
that ride the grey waves inland and pull
at her umbrella as she jogs
down the pier to their restaurant.

She drops a cigarette out the back door
before flipping the pale kitchen lights,
when she picks it out
again, woven in the odors
of old fish and bleach;
in a few hours, again, when
the older sailors come with their first catches
of the morning: in the sweat breathing out the necks
of their hoodies, and in their damp elbows
as they pile drooping fins on the scales.
Midday it crawls up her face
From the bucket of wall-eyed cod heads
by her small feet, and from her rubber gloves
and from the grime along
the skinny waist of her apron.

Each night after mopping alone
she wipes clean the last
chopping table, pours a styrofoam cup
of vodka and walks the dark beach.
She folds her apron into a seat and buries
her feet in the black sand—
in earth reduced to a field of ash
by the abiding hiss of the tide—
and she smells the salt in the coarse foam
that blasts her ankles, that dives
against the rocks standing in the shoal.



Tiffany Stewart, *Seagnet in Water*, photography

[creative non-fiction]

M.K. Foster

To Bury a Barbie

"If there is a soul mate for every person on earth, what happens to a person if his or her soul mate is struck by lightning?"

—Prince Henry in Ever After

Throughout history, there have been some great beings that were so great that their existence could only be contained in the form of two people. Among those super beings, dubbed as "tag teams" for the sake of modern language and cultural understanding, a few names stand out against faceless, grey, time-ridden back-drop of history, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Adam and Eve, Jack and Jill, Ginger and Fred, Bonnie and Clyde, Marian and Mary Katherine. Granted, the last on that list of illustrious brain powers is yet to be studied in every elementary school in the nation or discussed over steaming cups of coffee in smoke-filled rooms, never-the-less, it is significant. Never ceased to be amazed at what human beings can learn from plastic toys.



Elizabeth Wilson, *Mannequin Two*,
archival inkjet print, film negative,
13 x 19

Theoretically, we all have one great love in our lives. For some, that love may be their fourth or fifth spouse. For others, that love may be their prized salt and pepper shaker collection. For me, that love was Marian.*

Having discovered her at the bottom of my doll bin at age six and brushing the dust from years of disregard out of her shining, golden hair, I redressed, re-invented, and re-introduced Marian to my Barbie doll family, as I was apt to do whenever I became bored with whatever games I had been playing lately. Instead of casting her aside after only a few costume changes, I kept Marian out and continued playing with her. There was something special about her pink palm tree earrings, exotic crimped hair, and twinkling, glitter-brushed eye, and I knew from the first time that I switched her from her “Beach Fun” outfit to her “Roller Skating Magic” outfit that we were meant to play together every day for the rest of our lives.

We did *everything* together. Marian went to the mall with me. Marian came to my Grandmother’s house with me. Marian ate pancakes and brushed her teeth with me. Of course, my younger sister was jealous of my golden haired beauty and attempted to sabotage my happiness with Barbie pranks, all of which consisted of hiding my Ken doll and favorite Barbie ball gown, but at the end of the day, my doll was still fairest in the land of the upstairs playroom.

It stands to reason that once anything reaches the apex of its existence, whether something becomes as healthy, beautiful, ugly, happy, or as depressed as it can possibly get, it promptly begins to decline. Such was the plight of my sheer ecstasy with Marian. My doll-consumed life could literally become no grander than the day I completed my all-American Barbie fantasy with my acquisition of High Stepper, an utterly gorgeous, cream-colored, battery-operated horse, or as I would come to refer to her, my trusty steed.

Having attained all possible grandeur and glory, it is not enough for a conqueror, or over-indulged American child, to recline on her laurels, inflatable pink chair, and sip fine wine from long-stemmed glasses, Welch’s grape juice from a purple sippy cup; she must attain the next level of success.** Since, in my little pink at least, Marian had reached her material potential, the final frontier of Barbie potential lay in the physical. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I’m talking about Barbie flexibility beyond the sixty-degree bend of her knees, ninety-degree bend of her spine, and one hundred seventy-five-degree bend of her elbows; I’m talking about gymnastics.

It wouldn’t be until the year 1998 that Mattel would come to its senses and develop a “Gymnastics Fun” Barbie, who’s *plush* and *wire* limbs could contort into any shape or fashion. Because of such shortcomings on the part of Mattel, on a fell day in 1995, a time when my naivety and innocence reigned in my Barbie kingdom, Marian’s short plastic life came to an end when she unsuccessfully attempted the “human pretzel,” a difficult yoga posture involving both legs of a person twisted behind his head, arms fully extended in front. To the smirking parent reading this, Marian’s injuries, consisting simply of a crushed neck and neck joint, were beyond the skill of both of my parents who had “cured” many a Barbie numerous times before by snapping their smiling rubber heads back onto their disproportioned plastic bodies.

Upon her untimely death, my family assisted in giving her a decent funeral, complete with a designer shoe box coffin and a candle light service. No amount of court-

It stands to reason that once anything
reaches the **apex of its existence**, . . .
it promptly begins to decline.

awarded reparations from Mattel could or would ever ease the intense grief and guilt that I felt. After all, the other timeless duos remained together, come death or destruction: Adam and Eve, cursed, Bonny and Clyde, shot, Fred and Ginger, cast in Oscar-winning movies, Jack and Jill, blunt force head and back traumatized. Gone were the days of my Barbie bliss. My 3 ½ ft. tall doll house, my dress trunks, my remote-controlled doll RV, my color-changing jeep, and High Stepper all collected dust and age like ruins of a fallen plastic empire.

Many years from now when a therapist, whom I will pay hundreds of dollars to listen to the story of my life in order to analyze why I shaved my head or committed some heinous act on par with that, he will inevitably come to this point in this piece and tell me triumphantly that I was robbed of my childhood. On the contrary, I was robbed of nothing, and if anything, I gained something from that fateful day. I learned the grace to let go of something I firmly believed to be engrained in the very chromosomes of my DNA and the strength to move on with my life.

Time, as almost every book, movie, song, or pathetic soap opera reminds us, goes on, washing away the markings of each generation like the steady scrub of waves upon sand; Children grow to the size of adults faster than Alice consuming the mushroom; and things that are gigantic and life-altering up-close look very small with the distance of years. Grown now, my interests range from flambeéing obscure fruit to writing bizarre, cathartic literature, but on occasion, I find myself in the doll aisle of some sweaty, crowded toy shop, gazing at the now innocence-corroding and materially-poisoning excuses for Barbies, and feel a quick, dull pang in my heart.

*Do not misunderstand me. While I respect the decision some have made to become homosexuals, that choice was not for me, my disclaimer included solely for the purposes of disenfranchising rumors and appeasing the politically-correct.

**This is the part in the story where the faint of heart, young children who may identify with my innocence, or those who simply have no sympathy for the broken heart of a six year-old American child, must turn away, cringing for the loss they couldn't prevent.



John McCarty, *Guatemala Balcony*, photography

Henry Palmer

A Spider Web Parachute Would Have Holes

"Is he on the outside?" she says.
"Yeah," I reply.

The longer he isn't inside
The shorter his breaths breathe,
His existence thin, on the out.

"Just flip on the wipers,"
I say just to get him off.
"Noo! You can't just
Kill him." The light grins
Green and he cringes life
Holding on for whatever.
"Besides," she says,
"He might have little baby
Spiders at home."

What a bad father with
Illegitimate probably shootin' heroin
Not church goin' lippin' curse words
Pluckin' the wings off other bugs
Venomous potent bitin' humans
Downright rotten scary punk-ass
Kids out too late on a Saturday night
While Dad sits nervous impatient
Eight feet on wet glass and shame.

Mom somewhere is noiseless and
disappointed
Surrounded by eggs and lofting
Black widowed single mom
Unfettered babes depaternalized
Without a lament.

"Really darling?
He's just a bug."

Filament, filament, pavement, splat.
The laws of fate stick bad father
spider windy
When the car executes at thirty miles
an hour
Fly right off goodbye.

Hermann

Will Granger

Electric wires scarcely find us
On the apex of this grass grazed hill
Shining with the wind's heave.
We perch in our ancient nest,
Wrapped in a quilt cocoon -
Our two bedroom countryside estate.

6 AM casts amber rays onto the cast iron bed
Waking us slowly, without haste
Our soundtrack, a symphony of
Creaking floorboards and humming radiators,
Wind chimes from baritone to soprano,
Accompanied by the woodpecker's percussion.

Our home colors with age:
The porch's parallel orange rust lines
From Gail's dual tone iron patio chairs,
The wall's vibrant lemon coat
Has faded to a peeling butterscotch.
The barn flakes a grayish residue laced with lead.

We leave the aging house searching for heritage
Down the snaking road, rocks snapping to our walk.
The damp scent of vegetation permeates our nose.
The fallen land-bridge thrives with dinner but
Catfish was bitter, we crave the traditional
Sauerkraut and boiled bratwurst waiting in town.

Liberty Baptist separates us from Hermann.
The cemetery lays decorated and pulsing of
Fresh arrangements, an aroma nestled into our taste
buds.

The thick cherry box had become earthen,
Like the foundation of our farmhouse,
We could smell the fresh dirt mound from the road.

Steel bridges cascade a Missouri riverfront.
Making way for wide cobblestone streets
Our senses, engulfed in Deutschheim
Where Amtrak rails welcomed her home
Over a century ago. Now, a town spirited as
Maifest litters the streets with fragrant corks.

Smoke from charred meats lingers in alleys
As we pass quaint stucco houses with
Stacks of logs along screened backdoors
Impatiens lining windowsill flowerboxes
Presenting thick pane-glass bubbles
Glowing from kettle fire

Age acts as water keeping
The foliage of these people green.
Roots grow outstretched and steadfast
Never releasing grasp from this German town.
This is where I wanted to live
And where she chose to die.



Gloria Fite, *Untitled*, photography

Elizabeth Wilson

Grandpa's Land

Standing alone in a pasture on the verge
of reclaiming itself
I am overwhelmed
by six feet of slender towering
plant stalks wrapped in briars
piercing my pant legs
—taking me back to five years old
picking thorn-encrusted overripe blackberries and
plunking them into ice cream buckets
in Grandpa's leather dirt-packed hands.

Struggling to stomp
down the dried stalks I
taste what it must be like
to be Grandpa, young,
clearing land
pulling vines
knocking down bushes
never knowing if I'll ever find anything
but towering weeds.

Carleson Dozier

Lines for the Day Before You are to Leave

Waking up before you
in the bright, diagonal light
of this unseasonable winter morning
amid the quarter note blasts of train whistles,
I cannot help but marvel at your body:
the quiet thickness of the arm
you have slung across my chest
like an afterthought,
the even splaying of your ribs.
In a few hours you will lift your head
from my shoulder with a slow yawn,
separating the pages of our skin,
and we will go on about the day's work
of building, brick by hard brick,
the places where love is kept.
But for now, the small, light pink of
your mouth is parted like a Red Sea miracle;
for now your heart and its measured rhythm are
enough to leave me fighting off joyful sobs.
Imagine it, the constant threading of the blood!

Lines for the Day

You Come Home

The whole time you have been away,
I have dreamed of cobblestone piazzas
crowded with the frightened flapping
of pigeons' wings, of ancient fountains
almost crumbling at the touch
and of you staring at dark-haired men
through conspicuously foreign aviators,
mute as a fish in some airy café,
unable to ask even for the day's
newspaper or a clean fork for your tiramisù.

I wonder if you will be any different
when you return save the
month of new length in your hair,
the names of long-dead painters
rolling around in your head,
the few pounds you may have lost
climbing the dizzying staircases
of so many basiliche.

Perhaps you have fallen in love
with a certain shape of pasta
or have begun insisting that
you will not have even a bite of dinner
without a glass of red wine.

I keep telling myself to be reasonable,
but something dark in me is sure
you will come back to me unrecognizable,
smelling of pesto and unable to love
my small, artless body after
having stood quietly, mouth open,
at the feet of Michelangelo's David.

Livingston Saturday Nights

I remember
the dusty Sumter County roads
through all those Black Belt towns,
the Southern summer night air
chugging heavy
through the truck window.

I remember
how the cool bottle made my fingers
numb like Sunday hangovers,
how the condensation pooled
in the Toyota's cupholders,
the Saturday Nite Regrind on 94.1,
the silly songs that played
while Taylor and I rehashed
disillusionment of grander cities,
struggling with sixth beer articulations
of what home means again
after college years away,
and the cymbal smash
of glass bottle on roadsign—
our rhythmic percussion
every six or seven miles.

I remember
how the simple joy
of the empty roads
waved cool over me
crashing against the warmth
of alcohol, then slipping away
leaving nothing but headlights and yellow lines.

I could never forget
how Livingston Saturday nights
smell when they die—
pungent rubber melting on asphalt
and the long, obligatory moment of silence
while the idling engine laments
a bit of youthful immortality
scattering like dust in the red
glow of the taillights then
a defeated “Man—
that was close.
Let’s go home.”



Jasmine Higbee, *Big Kid Ambitions*, mixed media on cardboard, 35.5" x 41"

A Letter to the Future Concerning Lanyard

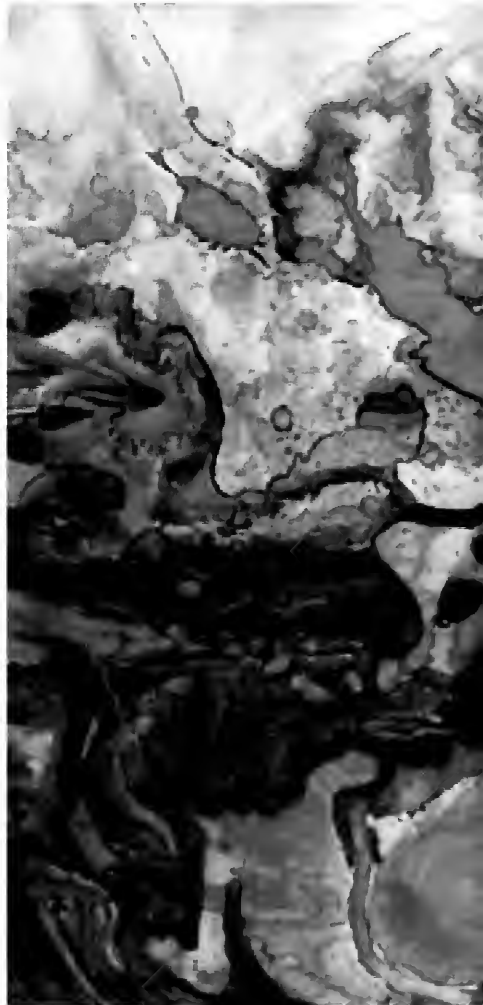
Henry Palmer

Dear a soul from the future,

My purpose in writing this is to make sure that the future always lives in terms of the past. I want to be sure that future souls live under the inspiration of the Unafraid Everywheres. I want people to know how Lanyard Luckyville saved the world. Let me begin.

It got to be a place in time where the silly, wayward souls here on the planet Earth at this point in the millennium, seemingly overnight, got an itch. There were a lot of them, so there were a lot of itches and, therefore, a lot of scratches. These people were everywhere and did everything—one was a banker, an editor, a 2nd grade school teacher, a young boy, another worked illegally on a farm, another was a porn star, one was the President of the United States, another sold tragedy on the beach in Mumbai. You get the point. Many people began to change their lives all at once.

Now let me backtrack for a moment. I said this itch happened overnight. This is not exactly true



[fiction]

Luckyville and the Unafraid Everywheres



Tryg Hoff, *Untitled #1 detail*, water color and charcoal

because the itch wasn't, say, an irritation on the skin's surface, and when I say overnight I really mean that the itch, which isn't really an itch in the conventional sense of the word, slowly built up, over time. They call this the snowball effect (but I don't know if you use this term in the future). Though, it did seem like it happened overnight, much like the snowball—the moment you know it's a snowball, it's too late. You are crushed by snow.

"Reynolds."

Ok, so picture all these silly, wayward souls who all slowly get an itch at the same time so it creates a snowball effect that seems like it happens overnight.

"Reynolds, darling."

This event that is rolling towards you is full of the worst kinds of stuff in the worst kinds of ways. There's deceit, beauty, hate, ignorance, love, juxtaposition, emotion, ecstasy, despair, curiosity—again, you get the point. So, with this ball rolling towards you (it's a bad thing), I would ask you, If something exists in reality and not in theory, is the problem theory or reality?

"Reynolds, answer me!"

"What!?" he shouted back to his wife.

"I made you some snacks," she said, this time timid with love.

"They better not be anything the doctor says I can't have. You know that Ashlee."

"I know, sweetie. I have those carrots that you like."

Reynolds walked to the stairs to see her standing at the bottom with a silver tray. She had a humble smile that pulled Reynolds down every step until he stood directly in front of her.

"Thank you," he said. Before taking a bite, he tilted his head so he could kiss her, gently, on the lips.

* * *

This sweater is quite frustrating and it makes my pits sweat. This makes me an agitated person because I really like this sweater except that it is frustrating and makes my pits sweat. I like it because it is red, my favourite colour.

I guess I should say why I am wearing it even though I am smelly and frustrated: It is because this is my favourite sweater and I want to wear it out with my sister tonight. I can make a summation of our being out of the hotel in 6 parts:

- 1) We get on the tube.
- 2) We go out to eat.
- 3) The eating place is good.
- 4) We say: Cheers!
- 5) We get on the tube again.
- 6) We go to an inside stage.

Ok, this is the place where my sweater is being bad. My sister tells me to stop being embarrassing but I don't know what she is talking about because I am not embarrassed. I am just sad at my sweater. In fact, I am not afraid to tell you, this red sweater is so frustrating, and agitating, and makes me smelly that I almost wish I had gotten my second favourite sweater colour blue. Though, mind you, notice I how I said

almost wish I had gotten and not not with almost because I am not ready to be that agitating to my sweater. It would not be so polite.

My sister taught me karma which I am trying to learn myself now but she just tells me to be quiet the show is starting. I give her agitations sometimes.

Oh, and you be quiet too because this is the best part of the evening that I have failed to translate to you yet! It leaves me with even more pleasure than that good place that we ate at that I label step 3! I no longer am carrying any agitations!

And I think I can tell you exactly why I am no longer carrying agitations when I perceive this. It is a singing play about cats and a cat is my favourite animal. So you can imagine to my surprise and to my delight an entire singing play about many cats!

I am now carrying surprise and delights and no longer am I carrying agitations!

My sister is now in happiness with me and I am in happiness with her because she let me perceive the Jellicle Cats.

But wait karma is a butt biter my sister would say.

Let me tell you what is next on the list of what happens next that leaves me with very many agitations:

Later after I have perceived the entire singing cats play and I am exclamatory!, I am finding out that the Jellicle Cats are in fact humans in disguise! To add to this

If something exists in reality
and not in theory, is the
problem **theory** or **reality**?

agitation, it is my sister's boyfriend who would appear to be my favourite animal to me not 10 minutes ago and now is just a boyfriend with a cat mask in disguise!

I know, I cannot believe it either how the Jellicle Cats have made me much like a fool and given me many agitations so that my eyes will make tears right now. My sister tells me that I am being embarrassing again but I am not embarrassed of anyone but myself if you can even count that.

I hate my sister. I hate the Jellicle Cats. I hate my frustrating red sweater.

Later at the hotel so she can meet with her boyfriend, which, I forgot to say, is another thing that I hate, my sister asks me if I can see through her dress.

And you will never believe what a clever thing I do! I tell her no that her dress is a perfectly normal dress that I and no one else can't see through. She is a believer of me and a fool when everyone in the tube will see her polka-dot undies that I have told a lie about my ability to perceive them.

A heeder of her own words she will be when a karma bites her in the butt!

* * *

The room was perfect for a young husband and wife. The bed was full of pillows of show and none for comfort. There were matching curtains, holding off the sunlight for now. A love seat, a cushioned chair, and an ottoman congregated around the bed to complete the family of furniture. This is where she wanted to live.

But it is where she worked. And that day, they told her, someone famous is working with her.

"Listen honey, I'm tellin' ya, this guy could be what breaks us through to the other side. Jus' do what he says and everyone will love it. They will love ya'," Danny said.

She saw him and trembled. She could not stop the shakes or break her stare from the famous Leviticus Jones. He hadn't noticed her sitting on the ottoman. There was this rage inside of her, but it didn't really matter because she looked liked a shivering slut. The rage had something to do with the pillows; it had something to do with Danny and Leviticus Jones. Mostly, though, the rage had everything to do with life.

Her nails were done, her hair was up, and her heels were strapped to a naked body lying on the bed of a room she wanted to live in.

* * *

The shifts are all the same like star lights beaming fast past your face in the ocean or in space. They blink every now and then as if trying to communicate that they are still human, some even vocalize. Some are brave, or rather naïve that one day fate bends a way in which it never has. Most are okay and just okay because they are old in the head and young enough to still be alive. Regardless, they still push by you in the street, one after a thousand after a million.

You aren't most of them.

Baskets of flowers, a magician, a skinny young girl are the soil and water for your roots. You are their prophet but they do not know it. The skinny girl has an infant strapped around her neck. You do not know if it is her child or her sibling or nothing at all. You then realize that there are many skinny girls with infants strapped around their necks. This is bad because they all ask you for money.

The skies have traded between rain clouds and the most beautiful sunsets you will ever see for the past your entire life. There are high rises and low rises. The low rises are more like reality to you because they exist in tin, and cardboard, and dirt, and sinking clothes lines, and beauty. The high rises you cannot see. You can only feel their shadows and how they loom in fear of you and you of them.

There are more flowers, more magicians, more skinny girls with infants strapped around their necks. There are more skies, more clouds, more high rises, more low rises. There is more tin, more cardboard, more dirt, more sinking clothes lines, more beauty. There are more blinking humans.

Your toes feel the sand of the beach. For the first time ever, you want to say something to one of them, but you don't speak their language.

You look up into the sky and sit on a cloud. Below, there are so many people to believe in. They walk on the beach as if they have lost something.



Chuck Smith, *Dyed*, 2007, woodcut and stamping, 14" x 11"

He walked into the cellar, axe in hand. His loafers made wooden noises with each step further down into the dark. For a brief moment, everything in the room went completely black as the door to the upstairs swung shut behind him, keeping the light outside.

The room smelled of despair and the floor was wet with tears. Starless eyes had only to rely on what they could see through the shadows and emotions of their other blind prisoners. The only tragedy was the gross sobs of the little blond haired girl that always cowered in her mother's bosom. He once knew both of their names, but in the days since their imprisonment he had forgotten them. It didn't matter, nothing really mattered for them. Their trivial existence made his brain float with warm comfort in the corner of his head.

He turned on the light at the bottom of the stairs and the sobbing girl, and her mother, and the man shivering in a ball on the floor became visual. The sobs stopped for a moment, only to be replaced by a whiny shriek when the girl saw the axe.

He paid her no attention and stuck the shivering man with his foot, stepped back for a moment, then kicked him in the gut. The man coughed and struggled to breathe. Rolling on his back as to look at the aggressor, the man's frightened freezing glare burned straight through the axman and onto heaven as though he were afraid of a bad rain the clouds were rumored to drop at any moment.

With his brain in the corner of his head and the man's eyes freezing and burning straight through him, the axman smiled at the man and swung. The axe blade cleaved the bridge of the nose, across both eyes, and the man's life ran out his vocal chords as if to run away from the clouds, and the rain, and the sobs, and the everywhere.

While cleaning the axe upstairs, the axmen hoped that the strike was lucky enough to be lethal. Hopefully the man would bleed to death out of his broken eye sockets. After all, having a man with loose eye balls and a severed nose with a valley in his face wouldn't do much good for anyone in the world.

Still, through the cellar door he heard the girls' faint sobs. The axman looked out of the window. He had almost lost track of the number of skeletons that congregated in his cellar. The screams were like drugs. The bones were like collectables. The sobs, though, were like guilt, and sadness, and fear.

The blood ran off the axe blade into the bottom of the sink. He soon joined the girl's crying chorus and collapsed on the floor. A man in a white tuxedo appeared next to him.

The silly, wayward souls would say theory, Lanyard Luckyville would say reality.

They walk on the beach as if
they have **lost something.**

The carrots were, indeed, one of Reynolds' favorite snacks. He could hear Ashlee washing dishes in the kitchen. He remember falling in love with her. He remembered how they saved each other. He remembered how they helped save the world.

* * *

- 1) I hate my sister
- 2) I hate my sisters cat masked boyfriend
- 3) I don't hate my red sweater but it is frustrating
- 4) All of these give me many agitations

That is just a summation for you so far. But now we are back in Oxford and I am at home and boring but with no agitations, except for the ones which I have labeled in 1-3. My sister she is at work but don't worry I can take care of myself thank you.

Watch:

- 1) I eat a sandwich from Sainsburys
- 2) I eat an orange soda from Sainsburys
- 3) I napkin my mouth
- 4) I watch tv
- 5) Tell again how I can take care of myself

See.

The tv makes me frustrated now because it is more boring than I am so I am getting on the internet.

And guess what I do on the internet that is so clever?

I am a bible reader but I do not buy it from the store I read it on the internet!

Yes, and I have already read the first two books! They are Genesis and Exodus.

Mum would be proud of me so much for this success but she is dead I am sorry to tell. And it is for her that I continue with the book of the bible that I fill in the search engine: leviticus.

Oh my! Can you imagine to my surprise when the 4th leviticus on the search engine is not a book of the bible at all but a naked man and lady website! I perceive a naked man named Leviticus Jones who makes internet videos with many naked ladies.

This excites me more than the bible and I very much like the woman's derriere. The butt biter is not the karma in this one!

But, like I have labeled in 1, I have told you how I hate my sister and I do even more now that she walks in from work and sees me on the naked man and lady website.

She laughs at me and I cry and she says I am embarrassing some more.

A girl in India has been on the streets for hours. Her mother sells flowers. Her father is looking for work. She takes care of her baby brother. He is wrapped in a cloth which is strapped around her neck.

It is tough begging to those who are panhandlers themselves.

The girl sees a man in a white tuxedo plow through the people. He doesn't have any money, but the girl follows him to the beach anyway. The girl follows him until she

can no longer. He is gone. The girl drops a coin on the beach and searches for it in the sand.

She stood in check-out aisle number 5, third in line. Her buggy held bananas, frozen pizzas, assorted soups, CranGrape juice, and a box of Tampax pearls. An old black man fumbled with several one dollar bills at the front of the line. He was only buying a hammer and some electrical tape, but this transaction continued to grow into more time taken out of her already long day.

She couldn't decide if she had an aversion to the first man in line because he was black or because he was poor. However, there was no question as to the reason for her disgust towards the woman who was second in line. The woman's grotesque fat body was covered in a red sweat suit. She was the Kool-aid Man's wife. There were not many things more repulsive than the woman's cellulite legs that poked out of the pants that were too short and too tight for her. She imagined the Kool-aid Man's wife having only seven outfits for the seven days of the week—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet sweat suits. Today was Monday.

After the poor black man managed to get out of the line, the fat woman began to unload. The already long day was getting longer.

"I know you," a voice said behind her. She gulped and slowly turned around.

"Excuse me," she said. She was already nervous, anxious, embarrassed.

"Yeah," he said, grinning. He had starred at her chest three times since making eye contact. Encounters like this always reminded her that she was nothing. The man's downward roving eyes kept telling her she was only worth the \$3,000 investment resting



Katelyn Hancock, Untitled, charcoal

in her bra. She cringed because he had seen the best part of her before he even met her. He had seen her tits bounce up and down on the internet. He had seen her whore herself out to multiple partners, camera angles, directors, producers, and other vultures of dumb blond 18 year old broken home tragedy.

A couple of cup sizes after high school graduation she was a porn star.

"Can I have your autograph?" he said. She looked around to confirm that she wasn't drawing anymore attention. She wore sunglasses at all times as insurance against this type of thing. Though, often she could not avoid the perceptive eye of her fan base. She couldn't hole up. She had to buy things like food for sustenance. It was food that she bought with money she earned from whoring.

"Sure," she said.

The fat woman turned to look. Shame is best dressed in the silence of sinners. She signed, *Ashlee Silver*, in a penmanship almost as seductive as her role countering Leviticus Jones. She imagined her fresh signature over a dotted line that read, "Yes, I am a white trash slut."

Again, you pass more fearful eyes on the street. This time, back across the world.

The people of Cornmarket Street are nearly blurs. You pick up a cup from Starbucks, a wrapper from Burger King. Kids run beneath with noisemakers and parents call them back in about five languages. White upper-class Americans wear recently purchased Oxford University sweatshirts. A guitar player, a cashmere scarf merchant, a man who tells you that September 11 was a conspiracy—they all look to you for something, but no one knows what it is.

You look up into the sky at the cloud that you just hopped down from and want to be there again. It is summertime over England and everyone is content for now.

There is a boy, however, sobbing up against a cell phone building. His red sweater is pulled over his head so that only his brown hair sticks out of the top. His legs are also tucked under the sweater as he rocks back and forth on the sidewalk.

You approach him. He stops rocking and sticks his head out of the sweater to look at you. For the first time ever, you speak.

"Young man I was once myself a silly, wayward soul like your self until just now when I have opened my mouth to tell the truth."

The boy stands up and walks towards you. He wraps his arms around your waist.

The kids stop running. The merchants stop selling. The Americans stop talking. Everyone on Cornmarket Street has stopped to hear you speak for the first time. Everyone is suspended everywhere just to hear your voice.

You see, Lanyard was a prophet of sorts. But, really, he was a superhero prophet with the superhero powers to make others superheroes as well. This was sorta like what Jesus did one time, only better.

I will give you an example: myself. I was just like any other silly, wayward soul stuck on the earth's surface and caught in the world's misfortune. I was just like any other person who was afraid. I was an axe murderer.

The details of the axe murderings I will spare for you as I am not sure if some child from the future will accidentally read this and lose innocence. What I will tell you is that Lanyard appeared to me right after one of my axe murderings and saved my life.

I was part of the snowball of people at odds with each other and at odds with themselves. Our greatest fear was that we weren't smart enough to spin the waking world in the right way.

Lanyard Luckyville was the superhero prophet that melted us. Lanyard Luckyville was the one who made us all superheroes.

* * *

There is now not one person in the world that I hate more than I hate myself. Not even my sister. I am made almost completely a fool. I give myself the most agitations. I give myself the most tears.

I fail to even have the energy to list why I have given myself so many agitations so I will just tell you that my favourite cat in the whole world was my cat Noah that I loved. I still love Noah even though he has only 1 life where he is supposed to have 9 and I still love him even though he is dead. If I was not a fool and I had been made with the knowledge that Noah has only 1 life then I would not have wasted that life by trying to pry Noah's disguise off with my knife. It is not a cat disguise. It is a real cat that is not real anymore.

I am such a fool and I make myself embarrassing so much that I run from home from the place of my favourite real now dead animal. No one will love me now that I have taken Noah's 1 life so that he is 0/1. I am so afraid now in the street where I don't know anyone. On top the large list of my already agitations the noise gives me even more agitations.

But it stops. And you will not believe for what!

A white dressed man takes away my agitations against the silence of everyone there. I hug him. My tears become dry on truth. The karma does not bite anyone.

The skin of a stranger is the only skin that she could love. She loved it beneath the lights. She loved it before the eyes of everyone in the world. She loved it because she was paid for it.

One that day though, it was painful. It was pain that had stockpiled inside of her since a time when life ceased to be romantic, since right after she was no longer innocent. This time the cameras saw her cry. Danny spoke.

"Ashlee, are you serious? C'mon and suck your 'Daddy's little girl' crap up because we don't need it. Now we have to shoot this angle over again and I don't want—"

The karma does not bite anyone

They all disappeared. A man in a white tuxedo replaced the cameras, the lights, the crew, and Danny. She joined him in the sky where her tears fell from a cloud for only a little while longer.

From the cloud, you see one of the girls in the sand. She walks back into the city and you follow her. You follow her all the way to her cardboard and tin low-rise. She removes the infant from around her head and places him on a worn mattress on the floor. She turns around and smiles at you.

You still do not have any money, but it is ok. She giggles and gives you a coin.
You smile back.

You extend your hand to her and you both ascend to the clouds.

You are wearing a white tuxedo.

You are Lanyard Luckyville.

* * *

We are the Unafraid Everywheres. Hopefully future life has lived in terms of the past in such a way that everyone is the Unafraid Everywheres. Hopefully none of us will ever forget that a poor girl, a confused boy, a porn star, and an axe murder were all just silly, wayward souls that decided that all they had to do was to no longer be afraid.

Sincerely,

Reynolds Wright and the Unafraid

Everywheres

"Reynolds, darling, how is the letter coming?"

"It is just fine darling."

"So are we ready?"

"Yes, lovely."

Reynolds folded the letter and placed it in an envelope addressed to the future. He placed the envelope in a box that also contained a coin, an axe-head, a red sweater, and one high-heel. He placed the box in the ground where the future might find it one day.

He and Ashlee walked from the box out into a field until they were no longer in sight. They walked until the world was unafraid and they were everywhere all at once.

The Kriegsmarine

My heart lies at the bottom of the North Sea,
Aft rudder locked in a desperate maneuver.
Sixty years cannot displace the weight
Of the ocean on my chest, heavier than
The monument built for Willi,
Tucked against the rolling Baltic coast
Where the young do not visit.

At the memorial, an iron eagle confronts me,
Wings arched out to catch the wind,
Mounted on a stone pillar blocking the sun.
The statue, covered in white seagull droppings,
Would topple over like a clumsy gymnast
Without the metal screws pounded into its base.

I walk along a crescent, cobble-stone path
Lined by red Weser sandstone walls
Cut into the ground as if to fool me
That Willi's grave rested here. I pass
Thirty thousand names, strangers,
Etched on hanging bronze plates.
"Willi Transier" resides under "U-864."

My wrinkled fingertips caress the relief
But the sculpted plaque
Does not speak to me of
Our children, who never existed,
Or his voice, which cracked like an eggshell
When he proposed to me, wearing a
Fresh-ironed navy uniform, pale neck
Framed by a blue collar, three white stripes.

And the letters molded in bronze fail
To mention the British Captain
Whose torpedo blew my fiancé's submarine
In half, sailors snagged inside,
Hagfish meals. The Captain received
A medal, laurel over gold and white enamel.

The photo in my coat pocket gives me more
Than that name on the wall – the smooth bridge
Of Willi's nose, cropped hair slick with pomade.
But the paper has become brittle and faded,
Almost crumbling in my hands. In the photo,
Willi does not smile at me, his enlistee chest
Puffing out, hiding crooked teeth that I loved.
At night, I put his photo under my pillow and
Rehearse Willi, feel his stubble prickle my cheek.



Allison Chang, *Diptych: Reality vs. Dreamstate*,
oil on canvas, 2.5' x 3.5' each



Mallory Ballant, *The Things That Stole my Family*; woodcut

Barn Raizing

My creatures run up the walls and dance through the lofts
bright gold and chiminy-red with tongues of black and blue.

Crackling rolling cackling through the hay,
they jump from rafter to rafter
Whispering dark grey secrets into the stalls,
Spooking the horses.

I watch them through the summerwine night
and think of Daisy's red dress
as she tumbled and rolled in the same rafters,
all-consuming folds and flares
hungry, like a winter fox in the spring.

She wore it with white gloves on Sunday to look smart
as she passed devotionals and smiles to strangers.

My creatures would rather dance than reminisce
They pet and procreate
groping the walls whenever their balance is lost
then tumble down, drunk and laughing.

Pastor Snell said that if God was the creator,
then Satan was the destroyer.

I wonder
which one
I am.

Black Jesus and Me

I.

Marvin is pissed.

The smoke stench the parking lot

Smooth, a tang into my nose.

His whopping white choir robe ripples as

He chews the plastic tip of the

Black & Mild and rants,

“Ain’t no gospel song ever end on the 6th chord.

I seen dis muthafucka get his Bible and start walkin’.

I’iz like, ‘Dis nigga think the song over.’”

Apparently, it is sermon time for Pastor Hatcherson.

Minutes before, Marvin funk the small organ

So it teemed the whole church giddy.

Hand waving clapping halleluiah the

Holy Spirit under gats shaped like mushrooms,

“Yes Lord!” up and down the aisles.

To the uniformed white person

It may be mayhem Bible astray.

But inside 23rd Street Missionary Baptist Church

It’s a righteous daze overflowing the

Bodies dressed-up like Easter eggs.

“An’ anotha thing, if I was Hatch’,

I’d at least give dat Lexus a car wash.”

Marvin places his hand on the dusty hood.

Kenny pockets the drumsticks and

He says, behind his reflective sunglasses,

“I’d have dem factory rims on the fo’ `bout

Two weeks, then I get me some dubs.”

The preaching within the brickwalled

Church building is quiet to us outside—

Something about emptiness or fulfillment.

A few days before, Marvin spun around on the
Organ bench during rehearsal, grinned, and said,
“You wouldn’t understand this
Because you are not black.”
And I never do.
“Once a month, Henry,
We’re goin’ play a black movie to increase
Your African-American cultural awareness.”
The first movie is going to be *Coming to America*
Starring Eddie Murphy.

“I can’t believe dat nigga.”
Marvin ashes the last of his Black
Onto the pavement where I watch it blow away.
Kenny is already inside and here I stand
Like a lost white sheep.
Marvin slams the plastic remnant and says,
“Pastor’s in there talkin’ ‘bout
‘Eradicate sin, edify the saints’
While he cuts off my song.
Edify deez nuts.”

II.

My dad made the joke,
That to keep the status quo,
A black church instead should have a
White janitor.
23rd Street has me—white
Bass player trying his best to be
Bootsy Collins make the bass clef
Stank and groove—
Our father, who art in heaven,
Funky be thy name.

Mom thought the joke was tasteless—
True to her high-church white-church roots.
Somehow, I feel as if I’m her leftover
Genetic ability as white-robed hand-swinging
Choir director at First United Methodist Church
Where, on Easter, it’s *The Messiah* and
A refined organ stretched pipes screaming grandeur,
Voices banging off the stained glass—unplugged.
I once sat in the pew behind her tearing Bible pages,
But I’ve moved on. I’ve moved the radio dial right
Past Garrison Kiellor, I like Tupac as a prophet.

I'm sorry Mom, but I've been livin' for the Black Church.
I picked up Marvin's habits on the Black & Mild,
Or, as my white friends call it, a nig-gar.
My bass now speaks in a raspy abrasive
Yell so it no longer sings, it croaks notes.
I'm sorry Mom, I am at church again
But I still drop my head during the sermon.
Here, though, they don't care who you are
Because you can't be scared of a religion that loves,
God fearing man can't love if he's scared of the music.

And it's Dad's fault I'm here like this.
When he gypped some poor kid in the early '80's.
Fifty bucks for the four stringed
Stuntman of my unrealized dreams,
Zelda, as I would eventually name her, was
Probably the bastard of a deprived hippie
Who cashed-out music for drug money,
Of some other frustrated college student
Who traded, as I like to think, the P-Bass
So I could one day surface, here, under God.

III.

We're back in the pocket of
23rd Street Baptist Church and this
Slow chant in A flat lurks reassuring,
Louder, powerful, the singers speak
"We are not afraid, we are not afraid."
This time on the turnaround when I feel
For the E string to bring it to the top
A chill runs through me on the cymbal-rolled
Swell to the tonic, and the spirit explodes
From a Black Jesus smile on everyone's soul.

Marvin abruptly weeps over the keys.
The organ quiets, I get scared and
Close my eyes over what I don't believe.
The chorus shouts a cappella amid
Falling tears inhabited voices the presence
Of God saving us measure by measure
Church cries embrace the dirt of the sinner
I am cleansed and no longer timid
In the shadow of death, under the music.
"Amen."

Afterwards, Marvin looks at me
With his salt stained cheeks and says,
"Aight now nigga, that was some church for ya."



Gloria Fite, Untitled, photography



Justin Fargason

Historic Marker Program

No honks, flashing lights, slow-drone
highway like concrete ocean quiet
trying to tackle white elephants
resting, thinking to the sound of traffic
like Canada geese, flying V's, and the midnight
train crossing through Brock's Gap.



Birney Robert, *Fire Series*, mixed media, 6" x 6" each

Sound of traffic moving and a sitting era past
 a giant hill of aggregate, industrial landscape.
 Every day I passed the sign, Brock's Gap—
 chain-gang centuries I never knew.

Now, the midnight train passing like
 traffic, quiet like the midnight
 train and now the traffic.

[non-fiction]

Mortuary

Natalie Bonner

Mr. L.C. Goodlett lies perfectly still in his golden coffin. Dressed in a black tuxedo, he looks to be on his way to a business dinner rather than enduring eternal sleep. His sunken-in cheekbones and pursed lips make him appear as if he has sucked on a lemon and died from the sheer hell of it. His glasses are slightly crooked, and his skin is shiny and tight.

L.C.—Last Contender, his initials make me think. I consider how this old gentleman was somebody's father, grandfather, or brother, perhaps. I stare at the body in awe. It fascinates me that



Science



Carrie Tompkins, *Andrea*, oil, 47" x 30"

someone could be living, dreaming, eating, and worrying one day, only to not be the next.

His body reminds me of a packet of turkey for some reason. Like you have the turkey in the packet and then you eat the turkey, and all you have left is a clear, empty packet. The body contains the soul, and then the body dies, and the soul presumably goes on, and all you have left is a corpse.

I don't have a particular fear of death, but I would take immortality any day. Maybe. My utter fear of scary movies inspires me to think that Mr. Goodlet may spring awake any moment and rip my guts out.

I turn to leave from the funeral parlor and briskly walk out to the entrance area that houses four overly busy, floral couches stuffed to the max. I sit on the one closest to the door and wait for my host, Gary Murphree, to return from the back office. I silently praise myself for successfully sneaking into the parlor room and meeting Mr. Goodlett. The entrance area and the corresponding furniture evoke a highly religious setting with a plethora of crosses, antique Bibles, and psalm sayings cross-stitched in frames. God is at home in this establishment.

Murphree returns and asks me to follow him to his makeshift office since his new office is not completed yet. He is overweight and wheezes and winces as we make the trek to his temporary office. We arrive and the light above us rapidly blinks nonstop causing me to feel like I am entering some alternate reality, for which I very well could have been.

To say that Murphree is comfortable with corpses would be an understatement considering he has seen them everyday for the past 35 years as Moss Service Funeral Home Director. Murphree, however, is quite a rarity as he has served simultaneously as both Funeral Director and Cullman County Coroner for the past 16 years.

Murphree chuckles good-naturedly and explains to me how he came to work at Moss 40 years ago when he was just a receptionist. "The girl I was dating when I was 25 years old mentioned to her father that I would be a great asset at Moss. Upon meeting me, her father, a funeral director there himself, instantly hired me," he says with a grin. "Too bad she didn't like me as much as her father did," he giggled like a schoolgirl on this note.

Who would have thought a coroner had a sense of humor? Or perhaps, having a sense of humor is a necessary factor in order to do the job? Either way, I liked the guy.

"My two careers are separate, but related out of necessity," he explains to me. I disagree. Seeing as he does most of his coroner work out of his makeshift office at Moss and has also deemed the funeral home the county morgue, it seems to me that his two careers are quite intertwined.

Forty years ago, Murphree developed his own curriculum at Jefferson State School of Mortuary Science as there was no established curriculum for a would-be coroner. He took health-science courses at UAB, anatomy and physiology at Gadsden State Community College, microbiology at Snead State Community College, and biology at Wallace State Community College.

Murphree coughs and takes a deep breath. "A coroner is like a bridge because I'm a member of the medical society, law enforcement, and on occasion, if I have an

inquest, I hold subpoenas, which make me a member of the judicial society as well," he says.

I take a deep breath. That's a lot of responsibility.

"I am the only official of the county that's a member of all three by nature of the job," Murphree further states.

He and I talk about what happens when a family wants Moss to conduct a funeral. First, Moss, where someone is on call 24 hours, seven days a week, picks up the body and starts the beginning stages of prepping for burial. They bring the body in, bathe it, and start the embalming process.

Murphree digresses into a major science lesson of how the body works and then finally describes the embalming process—in detail. Around the clavicle, just under the neck, the jugular vein is drained of blood and then the coronated artery is injected with embalming fluid that travels into the circulatory system. This essentially dehydrates the body, making it firm. Blood gives color to the body and when there is no blood, the body becomes very pale and stiff like leather.

Murphree excuses himself and says he will return in a few minutes. The blinking light has not let up and is beginning to give me a headache. A few moments later, he is back with a frown spread across his face. "I was going to see if we could let you into the embalming room, but they're using it right now. And state law prohibits any non-Moss employees or regular citizens back there when it is in use."

I ponder whether or not it makes me a sick individual that I would love to watch the embalming process. I shrug and thank him for trying as he repositions himself back in his chair and carries on about embalming.

"Blood is nasty and contains all kinds of bacteria. Contaminants in the blood eat away at the body. When we embalm, we must wear scrubs and masks just as doctors and nurses do, but for the opposite reason; whereas they wear their uniforms not to infect the patient, we wear ours to protect ourselves from the body's bacteria." Along with blood's bacteria, the administrators must be extra cautious about embalming fluid as it is literally toxic and has been proven to cause cancer.

Mortician duties encompass all sides of preparation, internally and externally. In conjunction with embalming, Moss must make sure that each corpse receives the best hair and makeup treatment possible. Moss typically uses water-based makeup rather than oil-based because the water adheres to the skin better. Moss tends to use Mary Kay makeup over other brands; this policy being based more on tradition rather than trial-and-error. Murphree explains to me in his monotonous tone that he had to take two courses called Color and Cosmetics in order to learn the correct procedure of applying makeup to the dead.

His body reminds me of
a packet of turkey. . .

The hair is a different issue. Moss has hairdressers come in and style, and often times, the deceased person's actual hairdresser will come in and style the hair one last time.

Thinking about hair makes me think about clothes. I mull over Mr. L.C. Goodlett's tuxedo in my head. Murphree tells me that Moss doesn't really provide clothing; that is usually provided by the family. He says he has seen men buried in everything from three-piece suits to coveralls and women buried in evening gowns to blue jeans.

Murphree bites his lip and states, "Dressing the corpse is often hard because the body is stiff and you have to kind of roll it around to get the material on, but you must be careful because if you aren't careful with the corpse, the skin gets pulled from the body, and the organs can shift, causing moisture in the body that creates gas." To avoid this, Moss occasionally dresses the dead in a front suit which means that there is no back to it. Murphree says that the family always knows if and when this must occur. I can tell right off the bat how genuine and caring Moss really is when Murphree says to me, "We try to dress them as comfortable as possible. I know if I was dead, I'd still want my underwear on. We do what's best for them. Always."

Murphree takes a second to sip on some water and I ponder how this man can deal with death everyday, up close and personal. He offers me some water and I politely decline, waving my bottle of Aquafina. He asks me if I would like to look at the caskets. I nod yes, but first I ask him a question that has been curiously burning in my brain from the second I entered Moss.

I ask Murphree if it's true that only the coroner can pronounce someone dead. He chuckles, the pink of his cheeks turning to a jolly red. "No, that is a myth. Any medical personnel—a cop, nurse, paramedic—any of these can call it. I am the one who determines who, time, and by what means they came to meet their demise. I call the cause of death, be it cancer, heart attack, or whatever, and the manner of death, which could be suicide, homicide, that type of thing."

He searches through a stack of papers on his desk and hands me a sheet of paper entitled Alabama Certificate of Death. "Look at that and you can see more of what I have to fill out. Death certificates are a legal record and must be filed within five days after death." I thank him and start to put it away. "Oh, wait" he says, "I have to write VOID on that." After doing so, Murphree pulls open some filing cabinets and shows me files from years back of people who died in Cullman.

As Coroner, he must file a monthly report of everyone who has died. He gives me a stern look. "Now, we are drifting into coroner duties...And that is separate from funeral director duties," he lectures me with a smile. I grin and tell him that I am ready to see the caskets.

"I know if I was dead, I'd
still want my
underwear on."



Victor Thompson, Untitled, pen on paper

There are hundreds of caskets to choose from although Moss only holds about 35 in stock, which are not actual full-size caskets, but rather mini-versions mounted on a wall for family members to view and choose. Patriotic ones, eccentric ones, and shy pastel ones—each casket seems representative of the would-be inhabitant's personality.

I follow Murphree around a corner and into another room where there are eight full-size caskets. There is a pink, floral one to my right with darker pink text that reads "Mother." The casket looks like it could double as a bed. This reality prompts notions of John Donne, the poet who wrote the Holy Sonnets, to come to mind—how he had bought a casket and slept in it to prepare for his death.

But can we ever actually prepare for something like death?

Murphree explains that the different styles and material—whether the casket is stainless steel, copper, or bronze, all affect the price.

He shows me a traditional-looking wooden casket. This is a temporary casket that is burned with the body in cremation. He shows me the urns next followed by bracelets and necklaces that function like lockets, but hold ashes instead.

After this, we go to the wall of vaults. The casket sits inside the vault and once the vault's lid is on, the epoxy ensures that it is sealed forever.

Images of being buried alive flood my mind and I cringe a little.

Murphree expels another myth when he says that the phrase "six feet under" is a fallacy. "People are buried about four feet under, not six. That whole six feet under business is a phrase coined by television westerns."

He heartily laughs and tells me of a time as a young kid when he and his friend had built a makeshift casket and taken turns pretending to be the deceased.

Murphree is morbid; we share a common trait.

Along with the casket, the family would pick the vault and memorial package (which are the programs that accompany the deceased), and then they and Moss would write up a contract. Murphree says it takes about an hour and a half to take care of all this business.

I am overwhelmed by how many facets of business there is to take care of.

We go out to where the hearses are parked. He opens one and inside is what appears to be a stretcher. He closes the brown door and motions for me to follow him to a massive, silver container. The outer thermometer reads 33 degrees. It's a freezer that holds dead bodies. He opens it and a cloud of frozen air escapes, along with my imagination.

I picture a young girl who's had an autopsy done to determine cause of death. It's a scene both disturbing and challenging because in a way it's almost beautiful, but still tragic. Her face appears serene like a dewy-skinned angel, although one can only wonder how she met her demise. She is like some recovered artifact that has been plucked from within the earth's hidden depths. A rarity, maybe.

I don't try to block the image out. This is the outcome of Murphree's stories and my adventures in the study of criminal justice playing out in my head. The scenario is made complete by the old autopsy videos I used to watch in class with my criminal justice professor Bob. He always said I'd appreciate the information one day. And for a moment, I am grateful that I gave up the study.

It amazes me that Murphree is able to be so collected and professional in regards to everything we have seen today. It's a sad reality that he endures everyday. "I get depressed. I see a lot of things that others don't see. I see the way people live in their homes and the way people die. People tend to confide in me a lot. Maybe they view me as a counselor. I don't know, but they tell me their innermost feelings and fears."

He pauses to recollect himself. "Death is a terrible experience for most people, but it is satisfying helping someone at a time in their life when they're lost."

I presume he understands death, absence, and loneliness better than anyone. Life is fleeting and temporary. Murphree's jobs showcase this reality. He feels that being a Funeral Director is similar to a minister's calling. "You can't really do this work if you're not a Christian because you gotta know this is not the end," he says, his blue eyes clouding over from decades of memories.



Juliet Pruitt, *Figure*, charcoal, 22" x 30"

Driving Home

Home is driving the forty-
five minute slingshot straight
out of Birmingham's
sidewalk-wrapped city streets
in late Alabama summer
swelter—windows rolled down
so the heavy-handed noon breeze
sticks to my sweating body,
syrupy like sweet tea forgotten
on a front porch swing. Cracked
leather car seats adhere to the backs
of my bare legs, sticky
like hands after homegrown
watermelon on August afternoons.
Metal seatbelt buckles
sear my skin a camellia pink
as fried chicken fast food joints
whiz less frequently by car
windows and concrete strip
mall cemeteries thin out, giving way
to miles of tree-lined four-lane—
occasionally interrupted by dancing
pig barbeque signs and pot-bellied
mechanics propped against rust
bucket cinder blocked Camaros.
I know I'm close when road noise and
burnt rubber surrender to
Lynyrd Skynyrd southern rock
blaring from pickup truck radios
and chicken house fumes mingle
with honeysuckle, beckoning me
to signal my right turn off the main road.



John McCarty, *Grand Teton National Park*, photography

Charles F. Loveless Memorial Collection

The shiny plaque and the books from his office
were transplants here, in this one spot
where the sun broke through,
where there were couches instead of desks,
comfort amongst a Spartan sterility.
There in the middle of the library,
I recalled my father delivering the eulogy
for his friend and fellow professor of English—
how he steeled through the somber
with a terrifying professional distance.
But afterwards at our steady table,
there were humorous stories
that softened my mother and I
almost every night for months—
tales about Depressing English Literature,
a class they planned to teach at five p.m.
on Friday afternoons during the winter term—
Silas Marner and Ethan Frome, and Thomas Hardy novels.

I reached and pulled a softcover
Tennessee Williams from the shelf—
and I checked to see if the pages were sufficiently
yellowed with cigarette smoke and I opened it
and pulled the canyon between pages to my face and inhaled and

it was a Sunday and my father and I visited him
in that smoky office, with the yellow shag floors
and the fans blowing and all the books,
and I remember the bald stone busts of authors
and my father—
smoking cigarettes? He did, then, USA Golds
or Basics or Dorals in a softpack, and he and
Mister Charlie ashed them out in clay trays
I'd molded with my talentless hands at camp.
I remember jokes, some I understood and
many more that I couldn't share in,
Mister Charlie laughing that boisterous coughing laugh,
and pauses, with the hum of the institutional air conditioner
breaking in—then questions about minor league
and third grade, his thinning yellow hair nodding
and leathery tanned skin pulling into the same soft
natural smile that I would see once again
set with ease by skilled morticians.



Katelyn Hancock,
Untitled,
charcoal

M.K. Foster

Sliding Glass Door

You are impenetrable,
Cold and closed off,
Russia in the Sixties,
With a faded "Trespassers: Beware" sign
Hanging about you taunt neck
And swinging gently in the evening breeze.

At a loss for words for the first time,
A virgin to silence,
I may as well be a speckled moth
Slamming up against a sliding glass door,
Enamored with the sensual glow floor lamp
And crushing my .2-milligram brain
To a fine, gritty pulp.

Charles Peters

To the Lady of Fortune

His stool groans on loose legs
On the loose boards of the bar floor.
If only the women were so,
He thinks,
With number three or four half-empty,
And his gut half-full.
He inhales
From the community
Smoke cloud—cigarettes
Are too short-lived
While the booze flows
Steady.

He's found his lot—
Where the stools know his name
And the lights aren't too bright.
Spent all day
In the red,
But here the odds
Lean in his favor,
Like the man in the corner:
More whiskey than water.

A swig,
And number three or four is down—
Tap-tap on the bar.
Another, please.
The empty glass in hand
And those on-shelf stand
For kings and queens waiting
In the stack,
Single-serving gambles
For the daring:
Throw it all down on the next one.

And so the door opens
On loose hinges that howl.

Drawing in the night,
The cold, and a woman
In red shoes.
She breathes in the place
The clip-clops across
Loose boards to the other end
Of the bar, and throws
Her purse and jacket
On another loose stool.

Tap-tap on the bar again.
This time the silent solicitor hears.
Grabs a bottle by the neck.
Pours
And returns it to its perch,
Where it hangs just a bit
Over the edge.
All the while, the man's eyes stuck
On the woman
In red shoes.

The bartender reappears
With a handful of ice, tossing
The cubes in the glass:
Crap dice for throwing.
With a nod to the lady fortune
And a stead hand,
The man tips it up.
Sucks in the cubes
And spits them
Back into the cup.

Brian Zirbes
Cold Spell

There was a short hall in our old church,
like a sea that both joins and sunders,
bordered by a courtyard and a coffered wall.

Each winter a new season in it sprung
from the conflux of weather systems:
heat heaved from a hidden smoking vent

and mingled with a draft
which wheezed from the windowed side,
over ladybug carcasses and leaf bits.

In late winter, an old man, pepper-haired,
forecasted a late spring: "Ground gwyne be
white
tomorrow." And then reflected on the previous

night's storm: "I got some trees out in my yard,
and lass night they was shakin' hands."
And it made me think of

how, on sunned days, walking through
that half-lit and half-warmed corridor
made you bump along,

like a seed through a rain stick plinks,
or, as a leaf dangles,
between seasons.

This Doesn't Leave the Room

Jeremy Burgess

(A man of roughly 40 years and a young woman of roughly 25 years are stuck together on an elevator in a New Orleans office building early on the morning when Hurricane Katrina is set to hit, roughly 7:00 a.m. After spending several minutes trying to escape, the two, exhausted, are sitting down in the rear corners of the elevator car.)

(The two share several seconds of silence before dialogue begins)

WOMAN: You got the paper?

MAN: The what?

WOMAN: The newspaper...the Times-Picayune—don't you read the paper?

(Man digs through his briefcase as Woman is talking, pulls out an issue of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, and tosses it into Woman's lap without looking at her. Woman looks at him as if she wants to say something but decides against it. She opens the paper to the first page.)

Is this today's issue?

MAN: It says the date at the top.

WOMAN: Would it kill you to be nice to me while we're stuck here?

MAN: It's not gonna make anything better, that's for sure.

WOMAN: Why the hell are you being like this?

(Man slowly looks over at Woman, uninterested)

What's wrong with you?

MAN: Maybe the fact that you've been yellin at the top of your lungs for the past twenty minutes while I've been tryin to call for help on my phone—

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* —I was scared as shit, okay?!

MAN: *(Still uninterested)* ...Was?

WOMAN: Okay, I'm still scared, but you're not making this any easier for me.

MAN: *(Slightly annoyed)* Look, I was tryin to do the logical thing and call somebody. You just stood there and yelled without thinkin about the fact you were makin my ears bleed. I thought you screamed enough to sustain your conversation capacity for the next few hours.

WOMAN: Well then what the hell should I be doing?

MAN: Waiting.

WOMAN: Waiting?

MAN: Yes, for someone else to use the fuckin elevator.

WOMAN: There's a hurricane coming in a few hours! This building is probably empty except for the two of us.

MAN: So then who the hell were you yellin at?

WOMAN: I guess the same people you think are just gonna open the door any second now.
(Man becomes quiet, as if he's been proven wrong)
Maybe if you had *today's* issue of the Times then we would know when the—

MAN: *(Interrupting)* —I didn't exactly waltz my way in here and grab a paper and a cup of coffee on the way in, alright?

WOMAN: Well then what were you doing?
(Man and Woman stare at each other for a few seconds)
Why are you in here, anyway?

MAN: Why exactly are you so interested?

WOMAN: I'm just talking. If we're gonna be in here for a while, there's no point in being quiet the whole time.

MAN: If I don't say anything, you're just gonna keep talkin to yourself aren't you?

WOMAN: I could sing, if you'd prefer.

MAN: *(After long pause)* I had a pretty late night last night.

WOMAN: On a Sunday?

MAN: Well I wasn't at church.

WOMAN: Well I don't know many churches that keep preaching until 7 a.m.
(Man starts to lose interest again)
You still haven't told me where you were.

MAN: You should probably just worry about where I am now, and that's stuck with you on an elevator.

WOMAN: See, you're doing it again!

MAN: Just what is it that I'm doin?

WOMAN: You're holding out on me.

MAN: Do what?

WOMAN: You're keeping it all in. Your life, your secrets. Everything.

MAN: This ain't truth or dare, kid. We're not at a fuckin slumber party. I just have the unfortunate luck of being stuck on an elevator during a fuckin hurricane and so do you.

WOMAN: But what if I'm the last person you talk to.

MAN: What now?

WOMAN: What if the hurricane hits us while we're still stuck here? What if I'm the last person that you ever talk to?

MAN: Do you hear yourself right now?

WOMAN: What?

MAN: You're talkin like a lunatic. Take a look around. We're in a tiny room with no windows at the center of this buildin, and we're a few floors off the ground. This is probably the safest place in the whole city.

WOMAN: Alright, alright, so maybe we won't die. But that doesn't mean you have to be an asshole to me.

MAN: I apologize, okay? Bein stuck on an elevator doesn't exactly put me in the mood to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger.

WOMAN: We're not complete strangers anymore. We've spent about a half hour together now.

MAN: Yeah, well I spend half an hour with high school dropouts whenever I get my oil changed but that don't make us the best of friends.

WOMAN: Well, I don't even know your name yet.

MAN: I know.

WOMAN: My name's K—...

MAN: Don't.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: Don't tell me your name.

WOMAN: Why not?

MAN: Because then you'll expect me to tell you mine.

WOMAN: Well that's kinda the whole point of introducing yourself, isn't it?

MAN: Let's just skip it, alright?

WOMAN: Why won't you tell me your name?

MAN: No offense, kid, but I ain't really in the market for makin friends right now.

WOMAN: So when you tell your kids that you were trapped in an elevator during the storm of the century, you don't want them to know the name of the person you were with?

MAN: *(Pauses for a few seconds)* How long you lived here?

WOMAN: What?

MAN: How long have you been in the city?

WOMAN: I've only been here for about two years. I got a job with the printing company on the 9th floor after I graduated college.

MAN: LSU?

WOMAN: Ole Miss.

MAN: Exactly. I've been here for twenty years, kid, so I know what I'm talkin about when I talk about the weather. For one thing, this ain't gonna be the storm of the century. We get hurricanes here like they get snow up in Minnesota. If I thought that this hurricane was gonna huff and puff and blow my house down, I woulda stayed at home and put up sand bags or somethin.

(Man pauses, looks away, looks back at Woman)

And for another thing, I don't have any kids.

Your wife never wanted any?

WOMAN:

MAN:

See, there you go again.

WOMAN:

It's just a question!

MAN:

Yeah, but it's the fact that you're askin questions that bothers me.

WOMAN:

See, that's what I don't understand.

MAN:

You what?

WOMAN:

Well, you won't tell me what your name is. And then when I ask you about your personal life, you get quiet.

MAN:

I don't know why that's such a surprise to you. Do you go around askin people about their personal lives on a regular basis?

WOMAN:

No, but I don't get stuck on elevators right before hurricanes on a regular basis either.

MAN:

Look, we're gonna be off this elevator any minute now, alright?

WOMAN:

But what if we're not? What if it takes them hours to get us out because of the hurricane?

MAN:

Shit, will you stop talkin about this hurricane? It's a storm, alright? Just a big storm that might knock down a house or two. These things happen all the time.

WOMAN:

But it's supposed to be the biggest one since—

MAN:

(Interrupting.) Supposed to? Kid, the Titanic was *supposed* to be unsinkable.

WOMAN:

Yeah, but—

MAN:

(Interrupting.) Vietnam was *supposed* to be easy.

WOMAN:

But this is—

MAN:

(Interrupting.) And the Red Sox were *supposed* to win the 1986 World Series. But nobody every thinks about icebergs, Gooks, and Bill Buckner til it's too late. Nothin ever happens like it's *supposed* to.

WOMAN:

(Pauses, stares at Man for a few seconds.) You really don't enjoy talking to people, do you?

MAN:

I'm not much of a people person, kid. I try to stay to myself.

WOMAN:

Alright. Well if you won't talk about yourself, I guess I'll have to talk about me. Since you're not much of a talker, that makes you a good listener, right?

MAN:

I don't have a choice, do I?

WOMAN:

Well, we could sit here in complete silence, if you'd prefer that.

MAN:

(Pauses.) Go on.

WOMAN:

Well, I went to bed early last night while you were out late. I probably fell asleep at 10 or so.

MAN:

Were you really scheduled to work today?

WOMAN:

No. Well, not really. They gave us the day off because of the hurricane.

MAN:

But you came in anyway.

We're all hidin' something, kid.

Just with me it ain't stationary.

- WOMAN:** Well, my boss doesn't know I'm here. I'm actually planning on quitting soon. I'm just a secretary here, and this other office a few blocks away is considering between me and a couple of other people for a real job. Like, one with benefits and health care and everything. So I had to come up here to gather up my portfolio and everything. Whenever we print anything at work, it goes to the printer right next to the boss's office, so I figured it'd be best to come in when I knew he wouldn't be here. And what better day than today, right?
- MAN:** How come you didn't just print out all that stuff at home?
- WOMAN:** I don't have any stationary at home.
- MAN:** ...Stationary?
- WOMAN:** Yeah. Everything we print out here at the office gets printed onto stationary with our company name and address and everything at the top of the page.
- MAN:** What good is stationary from a job you're about to quit?
- WOMAN:** It shows my future employers that I had a job here, at least.
- MAN:** Couldn't you've just taken some stationary home and printed out your stuff like that?
- WOMAN:** I don't have a printer at home.
- MAN:** *(Laughs slightly, without opening his mouth.)* So if you're quittin your job, why are you sneakin around like this?
- WOMAN:** See, that's the thing. When I took the job here two years ago, I told my boss that I'd stay with the company and try and work my way up.
- MAN:** And?
- WOMAN:** Everything changed. Every day when I come in to work, I enjoy this job less and less. I have to get out of here.
- MAN:** Why don't you just tell your boss that you're gonna quit?
- WOMAN:** I can't.
- MAN:** You can't?
- WOMAN:** I'm too much of a people pleaser. If someone's gonna be disappointed or mad at me, I don't want to have to confront them.
- MAN:** So you're afraid to tell your boss that you're quittin because you don't want him to be disappointed?
- WOMAN:** Basically.
- MAN:** So you come to the office on hurricane day just so your boss won't see you printin shit out on pretty stationary?
- WOMAN:** Yep.
- MAN:** I don't understand you kids today.
- WOMAN:** What do you mean?
- MAN:** You're afraid to tell people somethin that they don't wanna hear.

WOMAN: Listen to you.

MAN: Do what?

WOMAN: You refuse to tell me your own name and now you tell me that I have to start speaking up when I've got something to say.

MAN: You're not gettin the point here.

WOMAN: Am I not?

MAN: I got nothin to say to you.

WOMAN: You just had plenty to say to me! First all you did was yell at me for getting stressed out about being trapped in an elevator during a *hurricane*...and now you're talking like you're my therapist.

MAN: Yeah, but that was neutral territory. I got nothin to say to you about me.

WOMAN: Why not?

MAN: There ain't nothin that you need to hear.

WOMAN: So you give me career advice and then you tell me that you have nothing that I need to hear?

(Long pause)

Just what is it that you're hiding?

MAN: There's nothin to hide, kid.

WOMAN: I don't believe you.

MAN: That's fine with me.

WOMAN: You're stuck here on this elevator too, you know. And you won't even tell me your name.

MAN: Don't get your hopes up.

WOMAN: If I don't know your name, why does it matter if you tell me anything else?

MAN: Think about it, kid. What if somebody opened this elevator and walked in here while I was tellin you about some scheme to assassinate the president, huh?

WOMAN: Well, I mean, I'd have to...

MAN: And what if I told you that I'm a date rapist, huh? Would you keep pryin into my secret life if that's what you found in there?

(Woman, with a look of slight fear/horror, moves a few inches away from Man)

Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I'm *not* a date rapist. I shouldn't've scared you like that. I'm sorry, alright?

WOMAN: *(Still slightly terrified.)* You really are hiding something, aren't you?

MAN: We're all hidin something, kid. Just with me it ain't stationary.

(Woman remains silent, stares at Man)

Alright, look, you wanna know about me? You wanna take a trip down the foxhole and see what you're really gettin yourself into?

(Pauses) ...Should I?

MAN: Hey, I'd be comfy just sittin here until somebody comes to the door. You're the one who keeps tryin to get inside my head.

WOMAN: Okay.

MAN: Okay?

WOMAN: Go ahead.

MAN: Alright. You know how I said I had a long night last night?
(Woman nods)
 I was in Biloxi all weekend. I told my wife that I was there on business...I mean, I was there on business. We were down there checkin out the shoreline and everything—

WOMAN: *(Interrupting.)* What do you do?

MAN: What?

WOMAN: What do you do for a living?

MAN: I'll get to that later. It's not important right now.
(Pause, Woman stares)
 Well do you want me to finish my story or not?
(Woman nods)
 Alright. Bottom line is that we went out to a bar, I met a girl and brought her back to my room.
(Woman turns away in disgust)
 What? You wanted to hear this.

WOMAN: I never said I wanted to hear about you cheating on your wife.

MAN: *(Unphased)* How old are you again?

WOMAN: That has nothing to do with...

MAN: *(Interrupting, sternly.)* How old are you?

WOMAN: Twenty-four.

MAN: You don't get it, do you?

WOMAN: Don't fucking tell me that.

MAN: *(Interrupting)* No, you really don't get it.

WOMAN: I don't get it because *you* cheated on your wife?

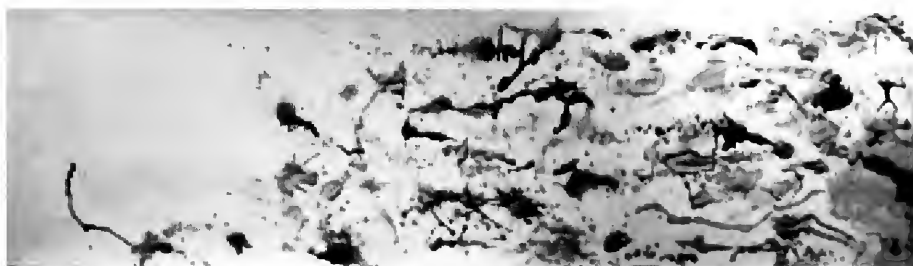
MAN: You think I'm the first guy who's ever cheated on his wife?

WOMAN: No, but—

MAN: *(Interrupting)* Look at the statistics, kid. Half of all marriages end in divorce, and I'd be willin to bet that ninety-nine percent of that is from guys like me cheatin on their wives. Women do that shit too when you...

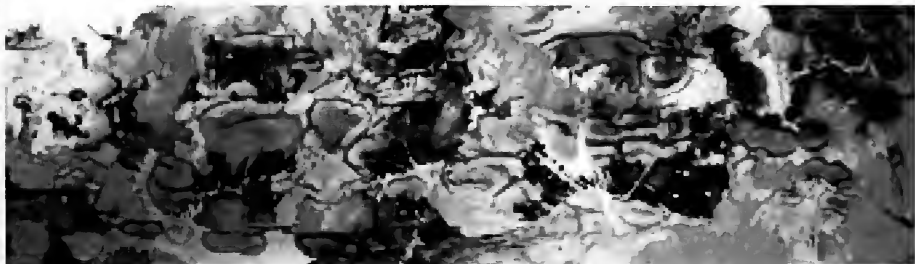
WOMAN: *(Interrupting.)* I've never cheated on anyone.

MAN: *(Laughs)* Like I said, you don't get it.



WOMAN: *(Becoming upset)* What?
MAN: You got a boyfriend, kid?
WOMAN: Yes.
MAN: How long you been with him?
WOMAN: Three years in November.
MAN: Does he live here?
WOMAN: No, he's at graduate school in Charlotte—
MAN: *(Interrupting)* So he don't live here?
WOMAN: *(Pauses)* Fuck you.
MAN: Don't pull the wool over your eyes, sweetheart—
WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* No. Fuck you. You don't know him.
MAN: There's a fifty-fifty chance that you don't know him either.
WOMAN: How can you live like this?
MAN: Like what?
WOMAN: Like *this*.
MAN: Like cheatin on my wife?
(Woman nods)
 What, you think she don't do it too?
WOMAN: *What?*
MAN: *(Laughs)* You're still new to the real world, ain'tcha?
WOMAN: A real world where people cheat on each other and feel fine about it?
 Yeah, I guess I am.
MAN: It's all the same world, kid.
WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* How do you know she's cheating on you?
MAN: She's been doin it for years. So have I.
WOMAN: But you don't sit around and discuss your mistresses at the dinner table, do you?
MAN: Nah, kid. She leaves clues around like a scavenger hunt. She knows I do it too, so she likes to make it almost obvious without sayin anything.
WOMAN: How can you *live* like that?
MAN: We both sleep sound every night.
WOMAN: But *how*?
MAN: Easy. Nobody's jealous if we're both doin it, right?
WOMAN: *(Slowly becoming upset)* Oh my God.

Tryg Hoff, Untitled 3, watercolor, 30" x 90"



MAN: When I'm outta town on business, I have my fun and she has her fun. But when I come back home we still sleep in the same bed, she still cooks me breakfast, I still buy her jewelry. Just cause I don't sleep with *just* her don't mean I don't love my wife.

WOMAN: No.

MAN: Do what?

WOMAN: No. Don't say that.

MAN: What, that I love my wife?

WOMAN: You don't have a fucking clue what love is.

MAN: *(Laughs)* Let me tell you somethin, kid. Love is when two terrible people stick together even though they know how terrible the other one is. I'm no good, she's no better. It's perfect. That's love.

WOMAN: *(Becoming stern)* No. You wouldn't *cheat* on your wife if you loved her. And she wouldn't cheat on you either.

MAN: It's becoming apparent to me that you've never been in love before.

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* I've been in it for three years now.

MAN: *(Raising his voice)* With *who*? *Who* is he? Tell me *right—now* who the fuck this Mr. Perfect is that you think you're with.

(Woman, becoming more upset, stares forward)

Or do you want *me* to tell you who he is?

WOMAN: You're an asshole.

MAN: Look, you dug this hole and dragged me in it. You bring all this shit up and go searchin around in my head like you're a fuckin shrink. and now you're gonna shut up when I ask you about you?

(Woman stares forward)

They don't teach you this stuff at Ole Miss, sweetheart. This is your real world education. Don't hold out on me now.

(Woman remains silent)

Oh, alright, I get it. Now it's your turn to be quiet and mad while I tell you fun facts about my life. Well, let's see here. My favorite movie is Rocky 4, my shoe size is 11 ½, I've always liked college football more than the NFL, I was raised...

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* His name is Jay.

MAN: Like the letter?

WOMAN: No, like the bird.

MAN: And he's how much older than you?

WOMAN: He's a year younger than me.

MAN: This kid is *younger* than you?

WOMAN: What does that have to do with anything?

MAN: Well when I was growin up, it was quite unusual for an older woman to be datin a younger man.

WOMAN: When did you grow up, the 20s?

MAN: Very funny, kid.

WOMAN: So what's wrong with me dating a younger guy?

MAN: Oh, nothin, I guess. I just always thought that when girls dated down like that they had self-esteem issues or somethin like that.

WOMAN: *(Raising her voice)* Self-esteem issues? Oh, and I'm the fucking therapist? Well then I'm sorry. Maybe if I slept around and didn't tell my boyfriend I guess my confidence would go through the roof, right?

MAN: *(Smiling)* Don't knock it til you try it, kid.

WOMAN: *(Gives Man a death stare. Man's smile fades.)* That's not funny.

MAN: Alright, look. Where'd you say he was in school at, Charlotte?



Chuck Smith,
Dyne Litho #1, 2006,
lithography,
16" x 12"

WOMAN: Yeah, but what...

MAN: *(Interrupting)* And you honestly think that this guy ain't cheatin on you? This thought has never crossed your mind—not once?

WOMAN: *(Pauses)* You love this, don't you?

MAN: This? Just what about *this* am I lovin right now?

WOMAN: You love torturing me like this...don't you?

MAN: Kid, I ain't takin pleasure in this one bit—

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* I bet you've got a fucking hard-on right now.

MAN: *(Laughs as if caught off-guard)* I what?

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* I bet you get off on telling other people that their lives are as bad as yours, don't you?

MAN: Whoa whoa whoa, hold on—

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* No, you do this all the time, don't you? I bet your life seems great when you tell everyone else that their life's slowly going to shit, right?

MAN: I'm just tryin to—

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* And what gives you the right to say that you know me or my boyfriend? I'm a complete stranger, just like you said. How do you know that me and Jay aren't part of the fifty percent that work, huh? Why the fuck is the glass always half empty to you?

MAN: The glass is just plain *empty*, kid. I've been around long enough to know that there *ain't* no glass. Three years with some younger guy in Charlotte ain't worth a shit to the rest of the world.

WOMAN: Don't talk to me.

MAN: Oh, so we're gonna play the quiet game again, huh?

WOMAN: I should've never even spoken to you.

MAN: I tried to warn you...

WOMAN: I should've never even gotten on this fucking elevator.

MAN: Alright, keep quiet then. We'll just wait here in silence til someone comes.
(Man and Woman stare away from each other. The two are silent for 10-15 seconds)

WOMAN: No.

MAN: *(Man turns toward her, staring)* No what?

WOMAN: I have to know.

MAN: What the hell do you wanna know this time?

WOMAN: You're still hiding something.

MAN: You don't know what you're talkin about.

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* If you cheat on your wife, that's not where it stops.

MAN: Kid, you don't...

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* No. I have to know what you're still hiding.

MAN: I got nothin left to say to you.

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* Why are you here?

MAN: On this elevator?

WOMAN: No, dammit, here. In this building. Why are you here? What is it exactly that you do?

MAN: You're puttin your hand too far down the foxhole now.

WOMAN: Tell me what you do.

MAN: You keep messin with the bull, kid, you're gonna get the horns...

WOMAN: *(Interrupting, getting angry)* Stop talking to me in nursery rhymes and tell me what the *fuck* you do.

MAN: You really wanna know?

WOMAN: Tell me right now or I swear to God I'll...

MAN: Or you'll what, huh? You gonna yell for help again? You gonna get the police to climb down into this elevator, read me my rights, and take me away? Is that it? Or are you gonna take care of me by yourself? You got a gun in that purse of yours?

(Pause)

You gonna shoot me, kid?

(Woman keeps staring, unflinching. Man breathes deep, sighs out loud.)

I'm an architect.

WOMAN: *(Pauses)* ...an architect?

MAN: Yeah.

WOMAN: ...that's it?

MAN: What, did you think I would be in the mob or somethin'? I was kiddin' earlier about assassinating the president.

WOMAN: But that just doesn't make sense...

MAN: *(Laughs)* So sorry to disappoint.

WOMAN: You work on the 14th floor, don't you? With that architecture firm?

MAN: That's the one.

WOMAN: Wait a second. Wait a second...I read about you guys.

(Pauses, as if gathering her thoughts)

You guys were the ones that organized that project to restore the levees a few years ago, right?

MAN: That was us...

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* ...And you're the ones who were criticized for not making any real changes, aren't you?

MAN: People criticize everything, kid...

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* Oh my God.

MAN: What, do you really believe everything you read?

WOMAN: *(Becoming frightened)* Oh my God.

MAN: Look, they were designed—

WOMAN: *(Interrupting)* You were the one in charge of restoring the levees?

MAN: Look, I'm tellin you—

WOMAN: *(Stands up, interrupting)* And now there's about to be a hurricane?!

MAN: *(Stands up, raising his voice)* Do you wanna know what I do? Huh?

You wanna know? I get things done. I'm a negotiator. I provide for myself. My team and I had guys on every side tellin us what to do. Spend less money! Use the best stuff! Make the people happy! How the fuck was I supposed to do all of those things, kid? I'm supposed to just swing in like Indiana Jones and make everybody happy? But that ain't me. That ain't how things are. So you know what I did? I came in and I cut costs to the bone. Anything that I thought wasn't necessary got tossed out.

WOMAN: Oh my God.

MAN: I paid off the engineers to say that the restoration was up to snuff, and I got a nice fat seven-figure bonus check from my boss for saving him and the company so much cash. Everybody's got a price, kid, some are just higher than others.

WOMAN: But the hurricane is going to...

MAN: *(Interrupting)* They didn't *build* them to stand up to a fuckin hurricane, alright? They built them to get by. And that's exactly what they've done since they went up. Our restoration project got by with no complaints from anybody. Sure, the newspapers all said that the levees won't hold up to a major storm, but nobody did a fuckin *thing* until Mother Nature came into the picture. And now there's nothin anybody can do about it.

WOMAN: I can't believe that you did this...

MAN: I didn't do a damn *thing*, kid. That's the point. Do your research. Back in the 70s, those guys built that shit on soft ground, the kind that will just cause the whole thing to collapse like it's probably doin right now. And then my firm puts me in charge of this project to *fix* it? How the *fuck* was I supposed to fix that? Put a cement truck underwater? Go look it up before you criticize me, alright? You and me are just as guilty as anybody.

WOMAN: But what's going to happen to those people?

MAN: *People?* Those *people* aren't worth a *shit*! I'm doing this city a fuckin *favor* by letting the hurricane wipe them all out. Everything here will be back to normal in no-time, except for those pieces of shit in those crime-infested communities. Those pieces of shit that rob each other and shoot each other and make it unsafe for kids to walk home from school. And this city will *thank* me. I'll get a key to the city.

WOMAN: Oh my God.

MAN: I only came here to gather the rest of my stuff before I skip town.

WOMAN: You can't do this!

MAN: It's already been done, kid.

WOMAN: But there's no way you'll get away with it!

MAN: *(Interrupting)* Oh I'll get away with it. Nobody will remember me or that lousy excuse for a restoration project once I'm gone. And you know who's gonna get all the blame? The fuckin president, that's who. Nobody ever blames the little guys like me, they just look to the top of the food chain and pick out a household name. We just do our dirty work and go unnoticed until the whole thing blows over.

WOMAN: I'm going to tell them that you did this...

MAN: *(Interrupting)* Tell them what, huh? You're gonna tell on me? What's my fuckin name then?

WOMAN: I'll tell them that you—

MAN: *(Interrupting)* And who the fuck is gonna believe you? A job-switchin secretary that's grabbin stationary behind their backs? *You just—don't—get it, do you?*

(Woman begins to attack Man, the two have a lengthy scuffle before Man is able to suppress Woman and shoves her into the corner. As Man is pushing Woman down to the

floor, the elevator dings and the front doors open by themselves—nobody is on the other side of the doors. Woman lies helpless on the floor, breathing heavily and on the verge of tears, as Man calmly buttons his top button, adjusts his tie, and puts on his jacket. As Man picks up his briefcase, he turns around for a quick glance at Woman before he walks out the front doors and exits.)

END OF PLAY



John McCarty, *Entering Gautemala; Flores*, photography

Editor's Note

Birmingham-Southern has an incredibly rich creative life buzzing under its sloping green landscaping, of which this edition of QUAD is privileged to have captured a glimpse. This year, we have not only fiction, but also creative non-fiction and even a one-act play (possibly the first drama to be published in QUAD) gracing our glossy pages, in addition to a wide variety of artistic mediums and a wonderful selection of impressive poetry.

However, there is so much more fantastic literature and art than we are able to publish in our humble 96 pages. In reading your submissions, I discovered that the space between these two covers is simply not enough to display a year of BSC's artistic creations. So, we did our best. However, I know that there are still more of you writers, artists, and poets that have eluded our aggressively swung butterfly nets. But we will lure you from the safety of the art building's paint-splattered walls, the flickering light of your computer screens, the narrow lines of your notebooks, and catch you yet!

I would first like to thank the writers and artists of BSC for being passionate, creative, and especially for submitting. I'd also like to thank my wonderful sub-editors: Kevin and Paul for wading through seemingly endless drifts of pages and inevitably suffering many annoying paper cuts, Susan for withstanding my chronic disorganization and scheduling deficiencies, and Allie for tracking down outstanding artists and then prodding them with the end of a paintbrush until they agreed to submit. And then I want to lavish Kevin with even more praise for being wise and knowledgeable about all the oddities of QUAD and publishing (or Quaddities, if you will), and guiding me patiently through them.

Finally, I am incredibly grateful to our adviser Dr. Donahue, the SGA, Jeremy Burgess and *The Hilltop News* for offering their equipment, the Art and English faculties, the Publications Board, and the rich, caffeinated miracle of coffee.

Policy

QUAD, the literary magazine of Birmingham-Southern College, was founded in 1940 and is published annually. The editors encourage undergraduate submissions, and those from faculty and alumni, which are reviewed anonymously by QUAD staff members. QUAD is funded by the Student Government Association. Submissions policies are subject to change from year to year. The views expressed in QUAD are those of the artists and authors and are not necessarily those of the staff, faculty advisor, Publications Board, SGA, or the administration of Birmingham-Southern College.

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Colophon

This edition was created on a Hewlett Packard computer in conjunction with a Hewlett Packard Laser Printer 4MD. Adobe Pagemaker 7.0 and Adobe Photoshop 7.0 were used in computer layout. Courier New, Franklin Gothic Medium, Book Antiqua, and Times New Roman fonts in point sizes ranging from 10 point to 60 point were used. Printing was done by Commercial Printing Company of Birmingham, Alabama: approximately 500 copies of 96 pages plus cover. All typesetting and layout were done by the QUAD staff.



